

# **The Octagon:**

## **A Plymouth story for Plymouth people**

by Joe Ridholls

NB: I've placed this online at the author's request, and although I've tidied the file up a bit, I believe there are still bits that need adjusting. If anyone is interested in making any changes, please e-mail [jonrob.one@gmail.com](mailto:jonrob.one@gmail.com).

If you want to send any feedback to the author, then send a note to the same e-mail address and I'll be glad to pass the message along.

## ***Preface***

I was phoning my friend Ken Hooper, a Salvationist who lives in Plymouth. I wanted to know something about the “Army” and the open air meeting they used to hold in the famous Octagon. He was unable to give me the precise information I was after but made a remark that made me think. ”The “Army” would finish its meeting and move off”he said, “and then the Blackshirts would move in!”

This fascinated me, two powerful yet distinctly different movements, proclaiming, in public, their particular convictions. My background is Salvationist and I remembered that a distant cousin mine had been a Blackshirt in Plymouth. What if twin brothers, living in Plymouth in those days, went in completely different ways? What if one became a Salvationist and the other a Blackshirt? What would motivate them? What beliefs, hopes, convictions would influence them in such different ways? This was worth thinking about, writing about so...

## ***The Octagon***

“My boys? ”, Alf Richards pulled a face. ””You never know what they’re going to do next!” He sucked pensively at his pipe. There was no tobacco in it but the sucking seemed to calm him. The fingers of the hand that held the pipe told a story, strong thick, most of the nails were black and broken, marks these, of the boilermakers’ trade. At sixty years of age he was a skilled tradesman, foreman of boilermakers in a leading firm in his native Plymouth. Happily, though sometimes tempestuously, married to Mary, a tough Cornish girl, he was proud of his family. ”I’ve got two “maids” (as they called girls in Plymouth) and two boys”he would boast. The girls he loved, of course, but he was closer to the boys, twin boys, Percy and Len.

“Boys” they certainly were not although their parents still called them that. Two girls had been born to the Richards family before the arrival of the long-awaited boy, who turned out to be two boys! It was not easy financially for the family but Alf’s job was reasonably paid

for those days and the feisty Mary could cope with anything.

They lived in a respectable part of Plymouth but only just! Neswick Street was not far from the notorious Union Street, haunt of sailors looking for women and usually finding one! Its many pubs were always filled to overflowing and the nightly fights gave naval patrols a lot to do and Plymouth's citizenry a lot to look at. Yet Neswick street was far enough away to be considered respectable though, unfortunately, near enough to fascinate the family's youngsters who would often risk parental wrath to pay forbidden visits to the forbidden street!

"Better go 'ome now". Alf put his pipe away (Mary didn't like it) and walked slowly homewards.

"Where are the maids to? "Alf knew they weren't at home. "Gone for a walk on the "Oe" (as Plymouth Hoe was always known). Mary didn't turn round, her busy hands were covered in flour, she was making, no-one could make a pasty like his Cornish wife, Alf would boast. "On their own or have they got any boys with 'em? "Alf tried to guard his daughters though not with great success. "Boys? No!" Mary always defended them. "Lilly was meeting Dorothy from work to go for a walk. They'll be home soon, don't worry" Alf grunted, unconvinced. Tired from a fairly hard day's work, he sat down in the rocking chair by the fire. The room was so built that there was only room for one person to sit in the corner by the fire. It was accepted to be Alf's chair, Alf's place although Mary would often grumble about it. "Nobody else got no chance to get warm except Father" she would sometimes complain. She and Alf would often bicker but never seriously. She loved him deeply, respected him for the decent, hardworking man that he was but would never showed her feelings. As for him, he never ceased to wonder at this fiery, often outrageous character he had wooed and won. He often smiled when he thought of the time when (he never found out why) she had climbed on the roof of the Royal Marine Barracks. He had been working there, putting the Marines' symbol onto the outside railings and he knew she was coming to bring him the usual pasty and flask of tea for his dinner. It was the catcalling and whistles of the Marines that alerted him to the figure of this attractive woman on the roof!" Whatever

were you doing up there? "he had asked. "Got lost"she said, grinning, "but they liked my legs!"

Inevitably he fell asleep whilst he waited for his tea. The room was warm, the smell of the fish never worried him (the pasties, he knew, were for tomorrow). These days he liked to know where everyone was before he settled. The maids, gone for a walk, Mary had told them that. But the boys? "They'm out playing football in Victoria Park". Mary had anticipated his question. He grunted. satisfied. At least they weren't out in the boat. He smiled to himself as he remembered that Sunday, six years before. He had enjoyed his dinner, had drunk his pint, smoked his pipe (Mary let him smoke after dinner) and had dozed off, sleeping peacefully for a long time. Mary had gone out to see her sister "out West Hoe"and he was content. The four children were at Sunday School, all was well. The following day a friend stopped him in the street. "I'm surprised you let they boys go out in your boat on a Sunday afternoon!"the man said disapprovingly. Alf shook his head in disbelief. "What do you mean? "he replied"they were in Sunday School!" "Some Sunday School"his friend persisted, "I saw them, and it was choppy out in the harbour!"

Alf kept quiet for a week. Then came the next Sunday. He pretended to go to sleep and, after a while the boys crept up by the fire, Percy reached up to the mantelpiece, unhooked the key to the boatyard and handed it to Leonard. Still Alf didn't move. Later in the afternoon they returned. put the key back quietly so that they shouldn't wake him. He still pretended to be asleep. Came tea-time. "I hope you were good boys at Sunday School"he said jovially. "Yes, Father"they chorused"Well then, here's another lesson for you. Get the strap!"

"Six years ago!"How things had changed! How they had changed! Then he had given them the strap. They were high spirited boys and he was a great believer in discipline, "spare the rod and spoil the child" had been his motto and he had never spared the rod, until a month ago. Twenty one years now, a working boilermaker like his father, Len had cheeked him. Seeing his father raise his arm to hit him he had said quietly but firmly"you hit me and I'll hit you!". He meant it, that was obvious and Alf never hit any of his children again. "Out

playing football in Victoria Park “, he approved of that. At least it was better than the outlandish things they had become involved in of late. Although twins, they were very different. Len was the tough one. “Like his mother”, Alf often thought, and Percy was quiet, thoughtful, obedient. Alf could never understand the choices they had made, the contrasting movements in which they had become involved. For the tough Len the attraction of the Salvation Army was surely strange and for the mild Percy to get mixed up with the Blackshirts was unbelievable. They’d be playing football now, but tonight they’d go their very different ways.

All four came in together, the girls giggling, the boys, following them, arguing hotly about a disputed goal. Lilly was the personality, bubbly, high-spirited, flirtatious, she was very popular with the boys and her parents often worried about where she was and who she was with. She was doubled up with laughter, holding tightly to her younger sister’s arm and nearly dragging her to the ground. “Shut up, Lil!”, Dorothy was laughing too, disengaged herself from her sister and smoothed down her ruffled hair. Shorter and less attractive than her older sister (“and more sensible”, her parents often said) she provided a very necessary restraining influence on her. She was darker too, more like her mother, her appearance contrasting sharply with the fair, rather florid Lilly. At that stage of Lilly’s life no-one guessed that her high colour was almost certainly a clue to the dread advent of the consumption that was to consign her to an early grave. “You maids!”, Alf, shook his head in mock disapproval, “come on, have some tea”. “All right for you, Alf Richards, you haven’t washed a dish for years!” Mary set the table, grumbling. “”We’m men, Father”said Len, teasing”that’s women’s work. “Percy sat down quietly next to him, nudged him”careful, Mother’s upset over something”he whispered. “Out tonight again, I suppose, you boys?”said Mary, sitting down, “usual places I suppose?”It was one of her disapproving . moods. “Yes, Mother”the boys chorused. “We’m staying in, Mother”said Lilly primly, winking at her sister. “Army”I suppose”Mary asked Len. “He nodded, sipping his tea. “And I’m off to Lockyer Street!”Percy anticipated his mother’s question. Her face set, disapproving. Lilly nudged Dorothy, looked straight at Len. “The Salvation Army, free from sin, tried to go to Heaven in a corned beef tin”she sang. He was used to her teasing, smiled back. It was Percy’s turn now. “How’s Ossie Moses?”she asked him. Percy reddened, “Sir Oswald

Mosely”he said deliberately”is a great man, one day you’ll realize that!”When the children had left the table, the boys to their very different destinations and interests, the girls, upstairs to change, Alf sighed. ”Isn’t it funny the way those boys go their separate ways”he said. ”More funny”added Mary, disapprovingly”that, every week they meet at the Octagon!”

The Octagon, where “those meetings” (as Mary would call them with a disapproving sniff) were held, was a well known feature of the famous Union Street . Originally intended for the more prosperous of Plymouthians ( the fine houses built on its quadrants had trim gardens protected by railings) it had gone downmarket over the years but remained a focal point, spanning Union Street, with a crossing road linking other parts of the city. An ideal site for “the meetings”, occupied regularly by the Salvation Army “open-air”and the very different gatherings of the Blackshirts. Convenient for both because the famous Salvation Army Congress Hall was in nearby Martin Street whilst the Blackshirts had not far to march to and from their Headquarters in Lockyer Street.

“I shan’t never understand them!”Both parents had said that a hundred times. The strange movements their boys had linked up with baffled them. Nominally Anglican, what they had seen of the Salvation Army had horrified them. Out of curiosity they had once allowed Len to persuade them to attend the “Army’s” meeting at the Congress Hall. They only stayed for a few minutes, the whole thing offended them. The noise, the apparent irreverence, seemed totally out of place for a religious service. It didn’t fit in with the tough, devil-may-care character they knew Len to be. When they returned home, puzzled, uneasy, Lilly nudged her sister. ”He likes one of the girls”she whispered. But neither did the Blackshirts seem right for Percy. Len, possibly, he was always ready for a fight but Percy was shy, quiet, retiring and the thought of him getting mixed up with those “Blackshirt thugs”concerned them deeply. It was Len who first went off the rails, (or so it seemed to them). It was following the band that day that started it all off. Like all of them, Len had often heard the Salvation Army band, he’d occasionally caught a glimpse of them marching along the street but, up to then, he’d had no interest in them. It was old Harry that put the idea into his head. Harry worked in the boiler making section of the Dockyard with Len and Percy. Jovial,

cheerful, hardworking, he never hid the fact that he was a Salvationist. Once they questioned him about the “old days” of the “Army”. He needed little encouragement, they’d never raised the issue before. “Following the band, that was some fun” he chuckled. “You see, when I was a boy we would mix with the crowd walking behind the band. In those days the band was not all that good, not very well organised. When the Bandmaster wanted them to start playing, he would blow a whistle and, after so many beats, they would start. In the same way when he wanted them to stop, he’d blow the whistle again”. Harry stopped talking, laughed till the tears ran down his face. “So, we’d get into the crowd and keep blowing a whistle. The band didn’t know whether they was coming or going, playing or not playing!” The brothers laughed with him. Warming to the subject, Harry continued. He became serious now. “One day we went into the hall after them, made a lot of noise, whistled, blew smoke rings during the prayers and then. ”He paused, his eyes misted, “then, while the man was preaching, we all felt God was calling us, we went out to the Mercy Seat and all got converted” The brothers sat quietly. “Must get back to work” said Harry. He stood, paused and said, quietly, “That is my story boys, all through following the band!”

The next Sunday Len followed the band. The band was more musical now, very musical in fact. Fewer people walked behind, Len, cautious, walked nonchalantly along the pavement, he didn’t want to be identified with the crowd. The procession, headed by the band, turned into the hall. Len hesitated a while then followed them. He’d seen an attractive girl go in before him! The noise! Unlike any type of church he’d ever seen before. The bandsmen, there must have been fifteen or more, were making their way up to the platform where they arranged themselves in rows according, it would seem, to the type of instrument they were playing. Near them was a much smaller group of ladies in the bonnet hats of the Salvation Army, “It’s the concertina band” he heard someone nearby say, Then, the hall itself, the Congress Hall as it was apparently known, was full to capacity with seemed to be hundreds of noisy people. People talking, loudly, laughing, moving around. He was astonished, appalled. Then he spotted her, She was sitting alone. Fairly small, very dark hair, she looked rather prim and proper but very attractive. She spotted him, their eyes met, she blushed, turned away. He’d put up with the noise, the apparent chaos, he had to get to know her! Then a middle-aged lady stepped forward on the platform, concertina in hand! She

started to sing, at first you couldn't hear what she was singing. Then the noise subsided, people joined in the singing. It was a catchy tune, the words too were easy to understand, to remember. He could hardly believe it but he found himself singing! He looked across at "the girl" who was singing heartily. "Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life. Let me more of their beauty see, wonderful words of life"the congregation was now totally involved as they joined enthusiastically, if not always very musically, in singing those words. The full attention of the congregation now secured, the noise lost in the singing, the lady at last sat down. Up sprung the "Major", that was how the lady next to him described him. He "led in prayer". No archaic language here, just simple, heartfelt words, homely expressions, a real, yet reverent almost familiarity with God. The congregation, noisy no longer. followed the prayer with fervent "Amens", they were with this man, right behind him as he prayed .

Then there was a Bible reading. Len noticed "the girl"took a Bible out of her handbag, she found the place and followed the reading. He'd never known a girl like that before! The reading ended, the Major began to speak. He held the congregation with apparent ease. His talk was simple, heartfelt, powerful, interlaced with illustrations which moved the congregation to tears or laughter. Then he challenged them. "Who"he asked"would respond to the message of the Gospel, the love of Christ and seek Him here and now? "Len was embarrassed, uncomfortable, he hadn't bargained for this sort of thing! He looked across at "her". Head bowed, she was obviously praying. He got up, went out. This was not for him. The question was, was she for him?

He was quiet when he returned home. He didn't volunteer what had happened or where he had been. Mercifully no one asked him, Mother was busy getting the tea, father, obviously tired, was sitting by the fire reading the paper. The girls were not home, he was glad of that. They'd have wanted to know where he'd been, that was for sure. Percy too was still out. "I'm worried about Percy"Mary really sounded worried. (this was the evening, weeks before, when the truth about the boys came out. ) It was unusual for this tough, feisty Cornish woman. Alf grunted, he was annoyed because Plymouth Argyle had lost again. "We usually know where Len goes but Percy keeps quiet. I hope he's not getting into



mischievous"she continued"he's always been the quiet one, "At that very moment Percy came in. She confronted him. "Isn't it about time you told us where you've been the last two evenings?"she demanded. As Percy sat down Len smiled to himself. They certainly had no idea where he'd been that evening!"Right", Percy turned and faced her. "I've been up Lockyer Street" he said. "What, been up on the Hoe?"she asked. "Didn't get that far"he said, smiling. "You know what's up in Lockyer Street don't you?"She paused, stopped pouring tea for moment, then her face set. "Not they Blackshirts?"she demanded, putting the kettle down. Percy nodded. "They're nothing but a lot of ruffians"she shouted"you're not like that, "Percy, quiet, mild Percy quietly nodded his head. Now they knew.

Like his brother, Percy had experienced something quite new, quite impressive, quite captivating. Every time he went up for a walk on the Hoe he had noticed it. The Hoe trips were usually in the evening. Young men and girls would walk along with apparent unconcern, eyeing one another, getting bolder each time they met until the "clicked". When they "clicked"they would pair off with one of the opposite sex and walk along with them. He hardly ever "clicked", Len did every time! Every time, walking to or from the Hoe that house had fascinated him, . The headquarters of the Blackshirts. Outside there was always a uniformed Blackshirt or two as if on guard. He had heard about their charismatic leader, Sir Oswald Mosely, heard of their meetings and the violence that usually followed . That night he went in. The black shirted guards looked suspiciously at him at first but, eventually convinced that this intelligent, serious young man was genuinely interested in their movement, they welcomed him. The whole place had an air of purpose, of discipline, of mission. They let him walk around on his own, he scanned the books, the publications, taking one or two samples freely available. He went into the gymnasium, watched the athletic young men training, admired their prowess, their dedication to this preparation for service, as they told him. He didn't meet Sir Oswald Mosely. The leader, they told him, would be coming soon to Plymouth. There was an open air meeting that night, he could go and see for himself, learn a little more about this challenging, strangely attractive new interest that had come into his life. Clutching the literature he had picked up in the Lockyer Street headquarters, he went down the hill into Union Street and turned left heading for the Octagon where, by now, the meeting should be taking place. There was a large and noisy

crowd. In the centre, standing on a small platform and surrounded by a circle of Blackshirts, a man was speaking. At least he was trying to speak for, among the crowd of curious onlookers there was a significant number of hecklers. Communists! He knew they were Communists. They heckled, jeered, booed all the way through the speech from the platform. Percy shared the current fear of Communism. He was not primarily a political animal but what he had read about the Communist "Gospel" (as some of them called it), their tactics and their phenomenal growth in some countries, had given him great concern. Her was a reader, a thinker and had become greatly concerned about the state of the country as it appeared to him. If Communists were attacking this movement then the movement was obviously worthwhile. He caught scraps of the speech, the appeal for national discipline, patriotism, manliness, brave and radical action. He admired the smartness, the courage of the few Blackshirts standing firm for what they believed as the crowd, egged on by the Communists, pressed forward, threatening, menacing. His feelings were mixed. Something about the Blackshirt movement appealed to him, chimed in with some of his instinctive ideas and principles. He needed to think, he needed to read, he needed to examine the movement more closely and over a longer period of time. Anyway things were getting ugly now, scuffles were breaking out, violence was getting out of hand. Len would have loved it but he was different from his brother and, quite frankly, he was scared. So he left, mixed emotions surging through his mind. He'd heard a lot about Fascism, Hitler, Mussolini and, despite stories he'd heard of brutality he had often wondered if Fascism was the answer to the apparent decadence that seemed to be undermining the body politic and general character of the country he loved. (As a boy, walking with his mother on Plymouth Hoe he used to stop before some of the memorials and solemnly salute! A thinking Plymouth boy would be hard put to remain unaware of the glories of the city's history. ) The weeks that followed found him thoughtful, unusually silent. "What's matter with him?" Mary had whispered to Alf more than once. "He's all right" he had grunted "you fuss too much, he's a thinking man, he's trying to work something out. "He'd never convinced his wife, she continued to watch Percy and worry secretly.

Len went out that evening. He had found out where the girl lived. Actually it was next door to a friend of his. Harry was somewhat surprised to see him but asked him in. Len hesitated

for a while, they chatted generally. Then there was a knock at the door and she came in!"Hello, Bessie", Harry greeted her, "this is Len. "The girl turned, saw him and blushed. "Hello"she said shyly, "I saw you at the "Army". ""At the "Army"? "Harry grinned, he'd twigged what was happening and it was Len's turn to blush. "Got to go out for a minute, won't be long. "Harry left them alone and they got on well.

With Len out Percy was able to read a copy of "The Blackshirt"that he'd picked up in their headquarters. Sharing a room with his brother he had little privacy or opportunity to read and anyway was not anxious for anyone else to see this literature. This was a golden opportunity. He couldn't put the paper down. So much of what he read chimed in with his own ideas, convictions that he had held for years but had never really thought through or been able to express. The leading article painted a picture of contemporary Britain, a black picture, a Britain without discipline, patriotism, ideals. The heroes of the Great War, it declared, had been betrayed by the "Old Guard", the old, effete, spineless, money -grabbing spongers who had wormed their way into the inner councils of the country. Promises of "a land fit for heroes to live in"had been shamelessly broken, Unemployment, strikes, unrest highlighted the parlous plight of what had once been Great Britain. Those in charge were like pigs at a trough, self-indulgent, greedy, careless of the needs of the generation that had made such immense sacrifices. There was now a need for a younger, fitter, honest, disciplined group to step into the leadership". Look at Germany", the article continued, "look at their pride in their country, the proud patriotism of a fit, purposeful Hitler Youth. Fascist Italy can show us something. Even the trains are on time! "The more he read the more convinced Percy became. The movement, he admitted to himself, might well have some negative sides. Violence was abhorrent to him but the attacks by Communists had to be resisted, by force if necessary. He laid "The Blackshirt"down, it had reinforced his growing interest in this controversial movement. Never one for precipitate action he needed to think very deeply, for a very long time, before making a decision, committing himself to a movement which would undoubtedly involve him in drastic action and, worst of all, provoke fierce opposition from his family, a family he loved deeply.

Len had really got on well with Bessie. Their conversation to start with was rather stilted.

Outgoing character that he was, normally flirtatious, cheeky even with girls he met, Len was much more inhibited with Bessie. Harry had told her about the Richards family, the two girls, the twin boys, the parents, so Len was, for once, at a loss for what to say. He succeeded in getting her talking about her family. Strangely enough her mother was also Cornish so they immediately had something in common. Her father, she told him, badly injured in his youth, was a surgical shoe maker. "Oh, you must be well off!" he chaffed. She bowed her head, made no reply. Later he was to learn that Coles family, compared with his family, were really poor. Soon he was to discover that her father's disability restricted his ability to work, that work that specialised was hard to get anyway. In later years she would tell him how her mother, receiving the very limited money her husband had been able to make, would weep as she tried, always unsuccessfully, to meet the weekly bills. Bessie didn't stay long though. Long enough, however for Len to feel about her as he had never felt before about any girl. She was different and he knew why. She was a Christian. The next time he went to the "Army" she smiled at him as he entered the hall. The man, obviously her father, who was sitting next to her, looked in his direction and nodded, Len nodded back awkwardly. Obviously Bessie had mentioned him to her family, or perhaps Harry had, the match maker! This time the meeting seemed less strange, he was getting used to it. He quite enjoyed the singing, the band and the talk, simple and straight to the point, which he could understand and follow. It was the "appeal" though, that made him feel uncomfortable. It happened every time. They would go into a kind of prayer meeting and folks would be urged to go to the Penitent Form, kneel and make an open declaration of their intention to follow Jesus. He experienced conflicting feelings. Deep down he felt God was indeed calling him to do this yet the thought of making a public exhibition of himself held him back. He glanced frequently over to where Bessie sat with her father, their heads bowed. "Dammit!". he thought, "I bet they're praying for me!" He immediately felt ashamed of his thought, perhaps he ought to bow his head and pray as well, or at least, try to. That would impress Bessie if, as he guessed, she was glancing surreptitiously his way from time to time. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable again, this really was pressure. The family had always been nominally Church of England, at least it was the church from which they stayed away! They always respected the local church though, largely because of stories they had heard over the years of the self-sacrificing, service of certain clergymen

and Sisters of Mercy during the terrible days of the plague, memories of which, were still part of the folklore of the area. "Thank God they've stopped!" The subdued, heartfelt, haunting singing had stopped. The prayers had stopped. He heaved a sigh of relief. They hadn't caught him this time. Or so he thought. As he stood he saw Bessie approach, her father close behind. She smiled, extended her hand. "Glad to see you here again" she said. She turned, "this is my father". The man was dark with black, curly hair. Len knew at once where she had got her distinctive bluey black hair from. Len put out his hand, felt the firm grip of Mr Cole. "Glad to meet you, my boy" (a real Plymouth accent) "especially glad to see you here. You must come home sometime and meet mother. "Mr Cole smiled, took Bessie's arm and started to move away. "When can you come?" she asked, . Len hesitated, looked towards her father. "Whenever you like" he said. "Tomorrow, for tea?" She looked enquiringly at Len and her father. They both nodded. "About four o'clock then?" (Bessie was keen!) he nodded back.

"Been to the Army again?" His mother tried to appear as if she wasn't really interested. He knew different. He nodded, sat down by the fire. "They have some nice girls go there I hear". It was Dorothy, grinning slyly at her sister. "So they say, they all play the big drum I hear, so I should be careful what you're doing Len". His sister's comments didn't really worry him. He was used to their teasing. What did really concern him was the strange, uncomfortable feeling he had experienced ever since he left that Army hall. There was something about the whole set-up there that he couldn't understand or explain but that something was beginning to challenge and upset him.

Percy was beginning to have some qualms. He knew his parents were from from happy with his associations with the Blackshirts. Reports had reached Plymouth of the very serious thuggery with which people were now beginning to associate the movement. Exaggerations they might be but he had certainly sensed an atmosphere and, indeed, seen examples of a violence that was foreign to his nature. Rumours about the behaviour of Oswald Mosely himself were circulating (and believed) by many people including his own mother and father. Len, being in a somewhat sensitive position himself because of his links with the "Army", had carefully refrained from being too critical about his brother's

Blackshirt involvement. It took some of the criticisms and jokes off him!

Yet, despite what he had heard and, indeed, seen, Percy could not shake off his fascination with the Blackshirt movement. A young man, profoundly aware of the state of the country, concerned at what appeared to him to be the darkness and greed that was creeping in, he could quite easily see that the discipline, the ideals, the patriotism of the movement seemed to offer a hope for the future that none of the existing political parties could equal. His parents would just not have understood what the problem was. For them the Blackshirt movement was wrong, evil even, and he knew they would never change their minds. Len, down to earth, practical and unimaginative, would simply be incapable of entering his brother's way of thinking. . The simple fact with him was (although Percy hardly liked to admit it even to himself) he was not a very clever man. The girls, of course, would giggle and pull his leg unmercifully. He shared a bedroom with Len and took every opportunity, when he was on his own, secretly to read Blackshirt literature to help to clarify his mind on what was becoming a serious issue for him.

As time wore on he became increasingly aware the Len too had his problems. Percy could hardly believe that there was anything in what the girls were teasing his brother about, His parents had maintained a discreet silence on the subject of the Salvation Army, hoping, no doubt that nothing would come of it. The sole visit to the Congress Hall had left them with serious doubts about the "Army"and they, he knew, were quite concerned lest Len, impulsive as he was, would get caught up in its activities. Strangely enough it was Len who brought matters to a head for Percy who had gone, alone, that evening to the bedroom. His brother had been downstairs, deep in conversation with Lilly, so believing he would be alone for a while, he took out a Blackshirt paper. The door opened, Len came in, saw the paper. For a while he was quiet, looked at his brother who made no attempt to hide the paper. "You'm not really going in with that lot are you? "he said, grinning. "Yes said Percy firmly"Yes, I am!"

Len sat down, shook his head. "You mean it? "he asked . Percy was quiet calm, quite firm, "yes"he said, looking his brother straight in the eye"yes, I do!" "You bloody fool, what do you think Mother and Father will say about it? They'll probably kick you out!"Len was

seriously disturbed. ! Listen”Percy turned to Len, put his hand on his brother’s shoulder. ”This isn’t just some fad, I’ve thought about it long and hard and I’ve made up my mind. ”He shrugged his shoulders! , ”I don’t really think they’ll kick me out but if they do, they do. ”Len was about to speak again but Percy forestalled him. ”I can’t expect you or them to agree with me or even understand me but I honestly believe that what Mosely and the others stand for is just what the country needs today”. He raised his hand got in again before Len could speak. ”Our country is in a mess, you know that.... ”This time Len would not be put off. ”What do you mean, a mess, no, I don’t know that””Look at the unemployed”Percy had the bit between his teeth now. ”You see them hanging around the Labour Exchange hoping for a job which they are almost certain they won’t get. Then they go off to the pub because they’re angry, frustrated, their wives and their children suffer, everybody suffers. ”He paused for breath, Len broke in”we’re not all like that”he protested, he stopped, he knew he was no match for Percy in an argument like this. ”Also, also”Percy persisted”many of our young men and women seem to have no aim, no ambition, all they seem to want is an easy life, a drop of booze, an”easy”girl and ”pictures”twice a week. Other countries”he was well launched now”other countries, like Germany for example, seem to have something to be proud of, they’ve got discipline, they work together”And fight together ”broke in Len”do you want to have someone like that Hitler running our country? ””No, no!”Percy was getting angry now, ”no, I’ve heard of some of the bad things he’s doing but at least he’s giving the people some sense of purpose, of patriotism. ””Whatever’s going on? ”their mother came into the room, ”you two having a fuss? ”she asked. She turned towards Percy, ”I hope you’re not laughing at him and the Salvation Army, ”she said. They both looked at one another and laughed. ”No, mother”they chorused”not the Salvation Army””You see”added Len, with a grin, ”you see, they wear red shirts!”

“Red shirts, black shirts, no shirts!”Their mother was not laughing. ”I just don’t know what this family is coming to!”she shouted. She was almost in tears. The boys both went up to her, put their arms around her neck. This was serious, they were worrying their mother and that hurt them. ”Don’t worry, Mother”, Len was trying to defuse the situation. ””When I said that I wasn’t trying to make fun of Percy and the Blackshirts it was quite true, but they

do wear black shirts and the "Army"folks wear red shirts, or at least, red jerseys". "Yes, mother"Percy added his bit"and, if a young lady I know had her way he'd be wearing a red jersey soon!"His mother looked at Len, aghast. "It's that Bessie Cole, isn't it? "she said"Yes, I can tell, you'm blushing!"Aha!", Percy was glad to have the attention taken off him"Is she that girl who wears pince-nez? the daughter of that lame man who makes shoes for people with funny feet? ""Mr Cole"Len was talking seriously, firmly, "Mr Cole is a very clever man. Yes he does make shoes and boots for people who can't get the right sort of shoes for them anywhere else and, I don't know if you know this"he looked angrily at Percy"lots of people go to him to write their letters for them. He's a clever man and a good man and"another glare at Percy, "I've never seen Bessie wearing those whatever you call them!". He stopped, hesitated, plucked up courage. "And"the look on his face was defiant"I'm going there for tea tomorrow!"

"What's going on? ", Alf came in. "Oh nothing's going on, nothing at all! "Mary Richards, fiery at the best of times threw her arms in the air. "No, nothing! except that Len's going to tea with a Salvation Army girl and I suppose soon we'll be asking that Ossie Mosely to come and have a pasty with us!"That man won't never come here my dear"he assured her, putting his arm around her neck. "From what I've heard of him he's a nasty bit of work and I can't understand a son of mine having anything to do with him or his Blackshirt ruffians!"

"Father"Percy was deeply hurt. "That man could well save this country from Communism and the follies of the weak, effete, lazy, selfish class that are running the country today. Look, Father, come with me to hear him speak, he's in Plymouth next week, see for yourself, listen to what he says. Or" (he smiled to himself, he knew Alf couldn't resist a challenge like this) "or are you afraid that there might be trouble? ""Afraid? "Alf roared the word out"me, afraid? Oh no! All right, I'll come with you next week. "

"You aren't really going with him are you? "asked Mary disapprovingly. "Why not? "Alf didn't like her querying his movements, "If there's any trouble I can take care of myself and look after the boy!"Huh, you need looking after yourself, You silly old fool!"She looked away as she said it, she didn't want Alf to see the look in her eyes, he would have



suspected she was up to something, she was!

The boys, twenty-one now, had a deep respect for their parents, never demonstrative, they admired, loved and trusted them. "Good job we trust Father" Len said to his brother one day, "I had another splinter in my eye this morning! . "Both boys were apprenticed as boilermakers at the engineering firm where their father was the foreman. From time to time someone would get a splinter of steel in his eye. Alf would cure it! He had a penknife which he had magnetised and he dealt with the problem by simply passing the flat part of the blade over the person's eye, a frightening but very effective cure!

It was the following day that Len went "to tea". The Coles lived near Victoria Park where he used to play football when he was a bit younger. He sincerely hoped the family had not noted his somewhat aggressive behaviour on those occasions! More than once irate adults had chased them from the park because of the noise they were making. He knocked at the door. Bessie opened it wearing a dress he'd never seen before and, those funny pince-nez glasses. A glance soon showed him that this house was poorer than his. Furniture was sparse and worn and, although the place was spotlessly clean it was easy to see that the family were not far from the poverty line. "Come in, Len". Mrs Cole was obviously Cornish". She was plumpish, prematurely grey and there was a warm smile in her rather wrinkled face. "Sit down and warm yourself by the fire for a while" she said, "tea will be ready soon. "There were two chairs by the fire, he took one and Bessie sat on the other side, facing him. Her parents had left them and there was no sign of her sister and two brothers. (Bessie had insisted they stay out that evening, she knew they'd "show her up").

The tea was good, the Coles had obviously done their best, cold (tinned) salmon, bread and butter and his favourite "fancies". He was still hungry when they rose but he appreciated the effort they had made and thanked them politely. He went to the door with Bessie after shaking hands with her parents, Then he shook hands with her! He darene't give her a kiss, not yet anyway! And, as he walked home, he felt a deep liking for them and a deeper sort of feeling for Bessie. And, much to his relief, they hadn't even mentioned the "Army", although, as he'd half feared, David Cole had "said Grace"but that was better than being

asked to do it himself, He had, however, said to Bessie "see you at the Congress Hall on Sunday".

Percy had some qualms as they walked towards the Guildhall. He hoped his father would be impressed although, frankly, he doubted it. Alf was always chuntering on about Mosely, "Baldwin said he was a "cad""he kept on repeating, "That, Father"Percy would repeat time and again "was years ago""We'll see"his father would say. Mary had gone out before them, she evaded all enquiries as to where she was going. "Going to see your fancy man I suppose?" Alf had said, laughingly. "I aren't too old for that"she replied, winking at the boys"but I suppose I'd better put up with you for a while yet."

The Guildhall was full, every seat packed. Alf looked carefully around, there were some rough characters here, some he recognized . Already there was a tense atmosphere. Although secretly hoping for a little"rough stuff"he hoped, for Percy's sake, that there'd be no trouble. "My Gawd!"he shouted, pointing across the hall, "there's mother!"Percy looked, it was true. His mother, mouth set, arms akimbo sat grimly, determinedly amid a crowd of roughs. "Father", Percy exclaimed, "what's she doing here? I hope they don't hurt her. "His father grinned"if they try"he said"then Gawd help them!"

They couldn't keep their eyes off her as she sat, confident, defiant, self-possessed, sitting apparently as calmly as if she was at home. They got a little worried at one stage. A slightly drunken man, sitting right in front of her, turned round and said something to her. There came the sound of an almighty slap followed immediately by an anguished shriek of pain. All eyes turned toward where Mary was sitting. "Well done maid"shouted Alf, "serve him right!"The unfortunate man, red-faced with shame, made his way hastily towards the exit followed by the jeers and laughs of the crowd. Mary sat impassive and, although Alfred was not near enough to see her face clearly he knew she had a gleam in her eye!"She's come to see for herself"he said, chuckling, to Percy"some woman, your mother!"After this little episode the crowd settled down and Percy sensed an air of anticipation. The scene was set, the zigzag, lightning-like motif of the party was prominently displayed, a massive Union Jack was draped theatrically on the platform, the crowd went silent and then,

accompanied by his black shirted bodyguard, to tumultuous applause, in came Sir Oswald Mosley! Everyone stood, even Mary. It was a magic moment, superbly staged, pure theatre. Alf could not keep his eyes off Mosley, "Fine looking man"he whispered to Percy. "Yes, he is a champion fencer"his son informed him. Alf, always impressed by physical prowess, nodded yet could quite make his mind up. This man was impressive, tall, lean, fit-looking and yet there was something about him, the eyes, yes, the eyes, t, hat Alf did not like. That he was a leader there was no doubt.

Mosley got up to speak. He was a born orator, his voice was clear, his presence commanding. It was not so much what he said, it was the way he said it. He seemed almost possessed, prophet-like, as he attacked the existing system, the "old guard"whose greed and indecisiveness were ruining the future of the young of the nation, betraying the noble generation who had fought in the Great War. "This Britain"he ranted"is not the land fit for heroes to live in, the land for which they shed their blood!"The crowd erupted in noise. The rousing cheers of his supporters, the boos, the curses of his opponents ("the Communists" Percy whispered to his father) joined in a frightening cacophony. Then came the attacks. Communists tried to storm the platform only to be hurled back by the Blackshirts. Scuffles broke out around the hall. Percy glanced anxiously over to his mother. She was all right. She had her umbrella! Alf was taking no chances, he rushed across the hall, grabbed her. "Come on, let's go"he said and, with Percy on one side and Alf on the other, they left the hall.

"Don't you never do anything like that again!"As soon as they entered the house Alf took his wife by the arm and shouted, wagging his finger at her. "If I want to do something like that again, I'll do it!"she replied, freeing her arm. Percy was embarrassed, He'd seen and heard (usually heard) his parents arguing before, but he had never seen his father so angry, his mother so defiant, She flounced off and Alf sat down, his face set in an angry frown. "I suppose she didn't do any harm, Father"he ventured". "Somebody could have done her a lot of harm"answered Alf angrily, "with that lot of ruffians!"They're not all ruffians, Father, some are public school men, gentry. Men returning from the colonies have joined, they're so shocked at what's going on in this country"Alf grunted took out his pipe. Alf's pipe was

his infallible solace. "Let it go then, boy"he said quietly.

"Boy!", Percy smiled to himself, born, like his twin brother Len, in 1913, just before the Great War, he was now twenty years of age and, like Len, had just completed his apprenticeship as a boilermaker. Both were soon to transfer to the "Yard", the Naval Dockyard which employed so many Plymouth men. Their father was not very pleased about this but they felt it would not be too wise to work under him for long! Anyway a "Dockyardie"was assured of regular, virtually permanent employment. "Just keep your nose clean"a cousin who worked in the Yard"had told him"and you've got a steady job for life. "

Len came in later, sensed the atmosphere and went quietly up into the bedroom. A newspaper"Action"was on Percy's bed. His brother had told him it was their latest publication. Rather more measured than previous papers it was intended to appeal to thinking people. Len smiled, in his hand he had the "War Cry", the "Army"paper that was sold widely in the local pubs although it was Bessie who had given it to him. He scanned it. The"Army"was doing strange things to him. Despite initial misgivings he was getting to like the meetings, he'd attended quite a few now. They were beginning to make sense, there was a strange, compelling awareness that he was not far from identifying himself totally with this strange movement. Go out to the Penitent Form though? He'd resisted this up to now but for how long? Next Sunday perhaps? The last time he went he had sat next to Bessie and, during the "appeal"as they called it she had sat, head bowed. She had never openly challenged him about religion but he knew well that she was praying for his conversion. Clearly her Christian faith, expressed in an "Army"way, meant everything to her. He knew she never missed going to the Congress Hall on a Sunday, even attending the early morning prayer meeting that was known, in "Army"terms as "Kneedrill"! So, as long as he kept company with her, he was profoundly aware of the subtle pressure her"Army"lifestyle was exerting upon him, Yet he had no wish to end the relationship, he found himself falling in love with her. She was kind, decent, pure and he enjoyed her company immensely.

Sunday came, he was going, as arranged, to the evening meeting, the "Salvation

Meeting”as they called it. It would happen once again, it happened every time, the “appeal”, the challenge to go forward to the Penitent Form, kneel in penitence and, hopefully, with the help of a wise, caring Salvationist, to get “saved”. So, with mixed feelings he walked towards the Octagon where the “Army”open-air meeting would be taking place. He normally went into the hall before they came in. Yes, the band was in the Octagon, he hurried past, crossing the path of numerous sailors in their famous “bellbottoms” walking purposefully along Union Street. Then he saw Annie, Annie, the rather simple middle-aged woman who haunted the Congress Hall. “Simple” the Salvationists charitably called her, to most people she was, in the Plymouth expression, “Dawby”. The trouble was that, every time the “appeal”was made, she would be the first to rush out to the Penitent Form. That she meant well everyone knew but her behaviour caused severe embarrassment to the officer conducting the meeting and great amusement to some of the less devout. Go out to the Penitent Form with Annie? Doubts crowded in on him, was he being led to something he didn’t really want? He turned back, rushed home, went up to his bedroom, ignoring his mother’s questions and lay down, confused and regretful. What would he tell Bessie the next time they met? Was he really feeling a growing religious conviction, an attraction to a religious movement totally foreign to his upbringing? Or was he being fooled by his contact with this attractive “Army”girl? For an hour he laid in his bed. “Are you all right? ”his mother called”would you like a cup of tea? ””No, mother”, he answered, “I’m fine, just a bit tired. ”Shortly afterwards Percy came in. “You all right? ”he was obviously concerned though he tried not to show it. “Yes, yes, yes!”Len said irritably, “can’t a man get a bit of rest without folks worrying him? “Leave me alone!”Percy turned to go out. “Sorry boy”Len said softly. “I’m trying to work something out. ””Bessie? The “Army? ”, Percy was sympathetic. He sat down on Len’s bed. “You’re not the only one trying to work things out!””The Blackshirts? ”laughed Len, the atmosphere lightened, “Mother and Father”said Len, “think we’m both “mazed”Perhaps they’m right!””Mother’s more sure about me being “mazed”than ever since she went to that meeting at the Guildhall”said Percy despairingly, “she’s really worried. The trouble is neither of them understand what the movement is all about. ””Not sure I do”commented Len”and I’m still trying to understand what the “Army” is all about. Yet, I do feel attracted to it. ””It, or her? ”, Percy was grinning. “Both”laughed Len. “Perhaps I should ask Bessie

to pray for us, t'wouldn't be any good asking Mosley from what I've heard about him!"

This discussion was the first that the brothers had held about their respective futures. Percy was more articulate than his brother but, as a family, they were always reticent, rarely discussed anything as sensitive as the issues facing the brothers. "Leave 'em alone" was Alf's advice when Mary raised this issue "they'll come to their senses!"

The following Sunday Len made his way once more to the Congress Hall. He felt nervous for he hadn't been able to pluck up courage to go and explain his thoughts to Bessie. Once again he walked across the Octagon. Once again, the "open-air" over, the band started marching in the direction of the hall in Martin Street. The ubiquitous sailors were very evident in Union Street itself and, as the band started to disappear from view, he could see men in black shirts appearing. Two carried a portable platform, others carried leaflets. "The Army goes and the Blackshirts come!" he thought to himself. He arrived at the Hall and waited, in the hope that Bessie would come. He was half afraid that she was already in the Hall as he wanted to try to explain what had happened the previous Sunday. At last she came, her parents with her. She looked questioningly at him and he deftly disengaged her from her parents. "About last Sunday" he started to say. She broke in "I thought perhaps you weren't well. ". No, no it wasn't that. "he replied. "Look, could we meet somewhere and have a chat? I do really feel bad about letting you down and I do want to talk to you, he hesitated about a lot of things. "She smiled, sensing his embarrassment. "We could", she suggested shyly, "we could perhaps go for a walk say tomorrow after tea? ""Oh yes, yes" he was relieved, "shall I call for you? ""Yes, about six o'clock, come on."

His spirits sank. Still very unsure of the "Army" situation, he had hoped to be able to go into the Hall on his own and sit a fair way from them. But "come on"! He had no choice but to accompany Bessie and her parents! He felt trapped. He knew perfectly well that, at the usual time, after the Major's talk, the pressure would start. It was pressure, there was no doubt about it. That the Salvationists carried out their usual procedures for good reasons he did not doubt. They clearly enjoyed, treasured the religious experience that was so much a part of their life. Bessie clearly did, as did her parents, although they had made no obvious

attempt to influence him, not openly anyway, except for encouraging him to go to the Hall. What bothered him now was, sitting beside him, Bessie and her parents would be praying for him! Never having been aware before of being “prayed for” it was an uncomfortable feeling. He enjoyed the “Songs” (as they called hymns) , the band was great, the “Songsters” (as they called the choir) were perhaps more enthusiastic than melodious, the Concertina Band left a little to be desired but at least some of the girl players were goodlooking! The sermon, as always, was fairly short, immediately understandable and... disturbing! This, he felt, was the prelude to the “invitation”, the dreaded appeal to go to the Penitent form. Previously he’d seen earnest, enthusiastic Salvationist “fishing” as they called it. They would move quietly around the Hall and buttonhole some unwary person they guessed were hesitating about that trip to the Penitent Form, He hoped the presence of the Coles would keep them away!

The Coles were all praying, heads reverently bowed, praying for him, no doubt! Reluctantly he had to admit to himself that the sermon had challenged and move him, he felt strange, something was going on inside him. To the penitent form? No, no! Annie had just gone out, there were sniggers, hastily suppressed. No, he was not going out with Annie! He rose, whispered to Bessie “I’ll see you tomorrow” and, before she had time to reply, walked swiftly away’

He hurried home, confused, upset, rushed quickly up to his bedroom, knelt by the side of his bed and burst into tears. He wept as he had never wept before, his sobs shaking his body then...”Alright, alright I give in, I want to be a Christian too” He got up, wiped his eyes, went down, kissed his mother, said “Mother, I’m saved!” and rushed headlong out of the door. His mother, absolutely flabbergasted, dropped the cup she had been wiping, went in to Alf and said “e’s gone mazed!”

Len, still panting, he’d run all the way, knocked at the Cole’s front door. Her father came to the door, invited him in and called for Bessie. She knew as soon as she saw him, nodded encouragingly and said “well? ” “I’m saved!” he blurted out, “I’m saved! ! I don’t know what happened or how it happened but it happened!” David Cole went up to him and shook his hand warmly, Bessie shyly did the same. “Come right in, boy” said David. “Mother”, he

shouted along the passage "Here's Len, he's saved!" Her mother appeared, brushing flour from her hands. "Just making a pasty" she said apologetically "saved are you?" Len nodded, tears in his eyes, unable to speak. "Then come right in and sit down, I can't give you a pasty but at least you can have a nice cup of tea".

They talked for an hour. Len, still unable to understand or explain his conversion did most of the listening as Bessie and her parents tried to help him understand what had happened to him, suggested what he ought to be doing now. "You must witness" said David. "Witness?" Len didn't know what he meant. "I mean tell others, your family for instance that you have given your life to Christ." Len laughed. "I told mother I was saved but I think she thought I'd gone off my head!" "Good, you witnessed" David laid his hand on Len's shoulder, "now you must pray, read your Bible and come to the meetings. Bible! There was an old family Bible in the front room of his house but Len had never looked at it, let alone read it. "Have you got a Bible?" asked Bessie, she guessed he hadn't, went into the next room and came back with a small leather bound New Testament. "Make a start with that" she said, smiling through her tears.

He hardly knew how to enter his own house. They were all there, in the living room, waiting for him. "I know you think I'm mazed", he had to take the initiative, "but something wonderful has happened to me. I've given my life to Christ and I'll probably join the Salvation Army". None of them laughed or teased him. This, they sensed, was real, genuine. Lilly came up, put her arms around his neck and kissed him, Percy shook him by the hand, his mother and Dorothy were in tears and Alf took the pipe out his mouth and said "You do what is right boy".

Later that evening as they were getting ready to go to bed Percy approached him. "I haven't said anything to you since you came in. He was awkward, embarrassed, he sat down on Len's bed. "Obviously you have had some sort of", he hesitated, searching for words, "experience. Len grinned, "you're right there boy" he said quietly, unusually quietly for him, "you're right there!" Percy sat quietly, he was always the sensitive one and he knew his brother would open up about what had happened when he was ready. "You guessed it was through the "Army"? "ventured Len hesitantly. His brother nodded. "As you know I've



been going to the Congress Hall. "Percy let him talk on. "Something, I didn't know what, drew me there. "He grinned, "no, it wasn't just Bessie. although I have to admit I liked her from the start. No, it was the people, the atmosphere, what they said, what they were. It just attracted me. Then", he was in full flow now, "then what they said seemed to make sense, It made me think, made me see myself in a way I'd never seen myself before. This time it came to a head. "He stopped, looked at Percy, hesitated and blurted out "I knew it was God speaking to me". He looked Percy squarely in the eye as if challenging him to make fun of him, "I knew. "Percy sat quietly, deeply moved, this was so unlike his boisterous brother. "I couldn't go out to the front like Annie. "Len grinned, "I'll tell you about Annie later. It was something I had to do on my own. I knelt here, "he pointed to the side of the bed"and asked Christ into my life and.... "there were tears of joy in his eyes, "and He came!" Percy sat silent for a moment, stood, gripped his brother's arm and left saying "Well done boy, well done!"

As he made his way downstairs he knew he needed to be alone for a while. Going into the room where his parents, confused, troubled, sat waiting he said "you don't need to worry about him, something wonderful has happened. "He kissed his mother, explained he had to go out and left. They'd be all right now. He walked towards the Octagon, no "Army" meeting there, he was glad to note, no Blackshirt meeting either, just the laughs, the shouts of the sailors. "I bet they're not thinking of the "Army"or the Blackshirt movement!"he thought to himself;. Something decisive had happened to Len and he knew something decisive was about to happen in his own life. He couldn't break this to his parents yet, they were still all upset about Len. He walked out to the Millbay area and made his way onto the Hoe. For an hour he walked. He had to do it, he knew he had to. More and more he had come under the Blackshirt spell. The contrast between these earnest, purposeful, mostly young men and the apparently aimless, often scruffy characters that seemed to abound was stark. Percy had always been a thinker, a reader and, as books were rarely read and not often seen in his home, he had joined the Public Library as quite a youngster. He remembered the startled expression on the face of the assistant when he asked if he could put his name down for a copy of "Seven Pillars of Wisdom"by T. E. Lawrence!

Strolling across the Hoe Promenade he once again experienced the sense of pride, of patriotism that the sight of the statue and memorials always aroused in him. As a mere child he had always embarrassed his family by insisting on saluting them as they walked past them. Drake, not unnaturally, had been his early hero. The story of the defeat of the Armada, "He blew with His winds and they were scattered" had inspired him from an early age. The likelihood that his father's family originated from Tavistock had led to wild imaginings that he was possibly related to the great Sir Francis Drake! The imposing Naval War Memorial, it had been proudly pointed out to him, contained the family name, To look out to sea and try to imagine the sailings or arrivals of great adventurers of past days, to think of Napoleon himself on a ship anchored in the Sound! Percy was a romantic and he knew it. He realized too that it was that side of him that felt the appeal of the Blackshirt movement. He had, though, a realistic side and was painfully aware of some of the negative sides of the movement. Some Blackshirts were brutal, some of their tactics he deplored but yet, despite all this, he genuinely believed the movement stood for the sort of values he had come to admire. The Blackshirt movement perfect? No, but it offered something that with which he could identify, a purpose, a discipline, a noble concept of Britain. He stopped at the top of the Belvedere, looked again out to sea. Yes, he had to join!

As he walked homewards he knew this was not the time to tell his family. They were still reeling from his brother's conversion and the change of life that this would entail. They wouldn't understand anyway, not yet. He knew he would have to wait for the right opportunity. He could still go up the the Headquarters in Lockyer Street and meet likeminded companions. He could still read their literature, study their methods but there was no way he could, for the time being, put on the black shirt himself.

As he approached the house he wondered what to say, what to do. He had tried to reassure his parents but he knew they were baffled and upset. Len was standing in the doorway, smoking. He gave a wry smile. "This will have to be my last fag!" he said ruefully, "the Army is against smoking. ""Yes, and, from what I hear, they're against drinking too" laughed Percy "no more pints for you then? "Len's face fell, he hadn't really thought of that! It was a family custom to have beer after Sunday dinner and he would normally go for

a drink with his pals some evenings. "Suppose not"he shook his head ruefully, "I hope Father and Mother will understand. ""Do you think it's worth it? "Percy, to be honest, had qualms about his brother's newfound way of life. "Yes, I think so, I really think so"Len spoke quietly, firmly. "Anyway you won't have to worry about smoking and drinking with your lot. "He too had qualms about his brother. The general opinion of the Blackshirts in his family and friends made him worry about Percy's increasing and very obvious interest in them. From time to time, especially since Percy started talking about them, he had gone to their meetings in the Octagon. He had been appalled. To him they seemed arrogant, bossy and potentially dangerous. He could just not understand what Percy saw in them. He had always been aware that his brother was more brainy than he was. You only had to look at the books he read to know that. Percy, too, was quieter, more reserved than him. Gentle, thoughtfull he didn't seem to fit into the Blackshirt picture at all. "If it had been you going with the Blackshirts I would have understood!"his mother had said to him once, "you'm a bit rough, like your father, he's altogether different. ""They haven't kicked you out have they? "Percy laughed, he knew his parents better than that. "No, it's just my last fag"Len took one final drag, threw the cigarette down and stamped on it. "There, that's it!"he declared firmly. Lilly came out. "You won't keep it up, you know""You wait and see"Len retorted. She tossed her head. "Like a bet on it? Oh, sorry, the "Army"don't let you bet, does it? ""I'm only teasing"she assured him, "good luck to you. "She winked at Percy, "see you both later, I'm off to the pub!"

The brothers went in, their parents were sitting by the fire, Father had his pipe, Mother was knitting. "Hello boys"she said, "come and have a cup of tea. "The brothers smiled at one another, a cup of tea was their mother's panacea for all ills. They sat down together on the sofa.

Their mother shuffled out to the kitchen and father put his pipe down. "T'was a bit of a shock, boy". he said, looking at Len, "but I suppose you know what you'm doing. ""Yes. father, "Len replied"I think I do. ""Then God bless 'ee, boy", his father said, picked up the "Herald", his favourite newspaper and put the pipe back in his mouth. Their mother was soon back, sooner than they'd anticipated. In point of fact she had boiled the kettle several

times expecting their arrival. "What about you then, Mother?" Len raised his eyes to her as he took the cup. She hesitated (always a good sign, the children knew she could be quite sharp if she spoke without much thought, which she often did! ) "Your father has said his bit?" she enquired, sitting down in the armchair that she had claimed as hers years ago. "Yes, mother he has, what about you?" She sighed, "well, she began, "t'was a surprise in one way and not in another. I knew you'd been going to the Congress Hall like we did once, "her face showed disapproval, "once! And of course we knew about that Cole maid. I suppose we hoped it wouldn't last but it seems it has. From what I hear she's nice little maid and if you want her, and the "Army" that's up to you. You'd better ask her to come round to tea sometime", she tried hard to conceal her concern and disapproval, "because I hear you've been there!" Percy winked at his brother, "that's fine, mother, I'm looking forward to meeting her myself. "

"Meeting who? ", Lilly and Dorothy entered the room. "Any tea left, mother?" asked Dorothy. "Meeting who?" Lilly demanded as if she had no idea they were talking about. "Bessie, Bessie Cole" it was Percy who spoke, Len felt awkward. "Oh good!" said Lilly, nudging Dorothy. "I'll bring my tambourine but I'll have to borrow a bonnet. ""Very funny!" Len had expected this sort of thing of course. "Now Lilly, stop it" her mother spoke sharply, "if she's your brother's choice then she'll be welcome and, mind you, when she comes we'll have none of that sort of thing!" Lilly went up to Len, "sorry boy" she said, taking him by the hand. "we'll be well behaved" she grinned, released his hand and, running out of the room, shouted "The Salvation Army, free from sin, tried to go to heaven in a corned beef tin!" This time Len laughed, he knew in his heart that she was only leg-pulling. He looked at Dorothy, shaking his head "good job I got one sensible sister!"

Dorothy, never as outgoing as her sister smiled. She turned to Percy, "you're going in another direction I think. "It was a challenge and he knew it. The family, he was well aware, knew of his interest in the Blackshirt movement. He hesitated for a moment. "Yes, "he said, I know what you're talking about and I am thinking seriously about the Blackshirts. "He stopped, awaiting her reaction. Dorothy was quieter, more thoughtful perhaps, than her sister. "Now", she said, looking straight at him, "there's a Salvation Army

girl for Len. Is there a Blackshirt girl for you? "Percy roared with laughter, "fancy you thinking such a thing! No, there's no "Blackshirt girl"as you say. "He paused, this was difficult. "It's so hard to try to explain it to you Dorothy, It just seems to me that what the Blackshirt movement has to offer is just what this country needs today. "She nodded, she clearly understood. "All right then, The Communists say the same thing about their movement. My boyfriend, ( she blushed) I'll tell you about him later, told me that he went for a haircut last week and the barber was on about Communism all the time, praising it up. Why should what you believe be any better than what the barber believed? "Percy was secretly pleased to have this chance of talking seriously with some of his family about this matter. "Look dear"he spoke quietly, patiently, "I have read a lot about Communism as well and I can see a lot of good in it but I have been horrified by some of the things Communist governments have done and, honestly, I'm afraid of what they could do in this country. Yes, it has a lot of good in it but we have seen, when it gets in power, what bad things can happen. "Dorothy, he could see, was just about to break in. "He started talking again quickly. "Communism has been tried and we know some of the results. Our beliefs, our movement hasn't yet been tried and I think it should be because I believe it would be better for the country"Len joined the discussion, he was relieved to have the attention move away from him, at least for a while. "Something like it has been tried"he said quietly"in Italy, in Germany and I have heard some of some bad things going on in those countries. ""We need to know about what is happening over there"Percy was really getting going now. "Most of those stories have come from Communists"he asserted very definitely. "You might bring up what happens at our" (he corrected himself, embarrassed) I mean Blackshirt meetings. We don't attack them, they attack us. "Mary came into the room. "What is it now, old man Booth or Ossie Moses? "They didn't appreciate her remarks. "Mother"said Dorothy, "we'm having a serious discussion. ""Ah well"her mother replied, a bit put out" Tidn't no place for me then!"As she went to the door all three of her children shouted"No, don't go mother, we'm talking serious, we'm not arguing, we'm talking politics. ""Politics! then I'm off, I 'ebbn got no time for they!"Mary, reassured that the children were not quarrelling, made a speedy exit.

"See", said Percy, "that's what people are like, they can't be bothered to take an interest in

what's going on in the country. ""Come on, boy", his brother said, reprovingly"you know Mother, she id'n nothing for politics. She's had all her work cut out looking after a family like us!" "Yes, right, I'm sorry"Percy replied"I shouldn't have said that about Mother but you know what I mean, don't you? "

Dorothy intervened. "You haven't got to be a politician or, "smiling in Percy's direction, "a Blackshirt, to see there's a lot wrong with the country. My Monty's been out of work now for three months, he's tried hard to get work but he hasn't had any luck so far, neither has his father. "She paused, hastily took out a handkerchief to wipe her eyes. "We were hoping to get married before long, now we just can't see how we could afford it. "

"Listen", Len was talking now. "Mr Cole, that's Bessie's father, "he looked around half expecting some teasing remark. "And I can tell you, he's a very clever man. "He stopped, yes, they were listening politely. "Well, he was saying to me the other day that politics nor politicians can put right what's wrong with the country, what's wrong with people? "Percy guessed what his brother was going to say but he kept quiet. Dorothy listened carefully, thoughtfully. "Mr Cole says it's sin. "Len paused, "you know what I mean, evil, doing things that are wrong and, "he quickly carried on before anyone could query or challenge what he was saying, "only God can do it". They looked at him, astonished. Could this really be the Len they knew, their lively, carefree, irreverent brother? He could see their reaction, he'd expected it of course. They all remained silent, no-one knew what to say. "Len spoke again"I know you think I'm mazed"he said, smiling, "but I do really go along with what he says. He's a smart chap and he has read a lot. "Percy and Dorothy nodded, they almost felt embarrassed for him. "I'd like to meet him one day"ventured Percy"and his daughter!"added Dorothy mischief in her eyes. Len could always cope with her. "Then come to the "Army"!"he said"you'll meet them both there. Anyway"he looked carefully at them, what would be their response? "I'm going to ask Mother to invite Bessie round one day!"

For quite a while things went quiet. The boys' parents and, indeed, their sisters, could see that both Percy and Len were sincere in their views. The rest of the family kept hoping that.

with the passage of time, both boys would “get over it” as their mother put it.

They didn’t “get over it”, both boys felt instinctively, although they had not discussed this together, that the thing to do was to keep quiet and see how things developed for themselves. In neither case, was there any question of doubting the rightness of their convictions although they both wondered where these convictions might lead them.

For Len, he suspected that the “Army” and, with that, Bessie, would figure largely in his life. The more he saw her, the more he felt respect and liking turn into love. And Bessie meant the “Army”, of that he had no doubt. She was a sincere, dedicated Salvationist who, as he beginning to realize, lived out her faith in her life. He felt her somewhat old fashioned, a bit prudish perhaps compared with most of the girls he’d gone around with though he could sense, when he was with her, an awakening of what he believed was love for him. With her background too, firmly Salvationist as it was, that’s where she belonged. She had told him, more than once, of the early days of the “Army” in Plymouth and how her father, returning from the march of witness, would come home covered in refuse and with his head bleeding. It Bessie and the “Army”!

Percy was not blinded totally by the Blackshirt movement. Much as he shared their philosophy, accepted their views about society, he could not remain blind to the excesses in which they sometimes indulged. He didn’t kid himself, he was afraid of violence, hated it. Yet, there was still this fascination, the Mosley charisma, the romantic dream of a new, clean, vigorous Britain that he longed to see.

Len wrestled with one problem . Would he eventually join the “Army” himself? If he did, he would have to put on the uniform! Percy too knew that open identification with the Blackshirts would mean just that... a black shirt.

Neither black shirt nor “Army” uniform were to appear for a very long time, at least not as far as the boys themselves were concerned. Both, though, in the weeks that lay ahead, were to delve more deeply into their chosen activities. With Percy it was with Tom, with Ben it

was with Andrew Chalk, Major of the Salvation Army, uniform and all!

"Nothing more seems to be happening with the boys, Mother" Alf had just said to his wife. "Not that we can see" she replied uncertainly "but it will, you see!" "You'm always seeing the black side of things, Mother" he said, sinking into his armchair and taking out his pipe.

A knock at the door, they looked at one another, they didn't have many visitors except their children's friends, and they didn't knock! Mary looked out of the window. "Oh, my Gawd!" she shouted, "'tis one of they "Army" lot!" Quickly Alf got out of the chair, extinguished his pipe (he knew Salvationists didn't smoke!) and went to the door.

There he stood, a uniformed Salvationist. "Good afternoon, my friends", his greeting was friendly, cordial. They were suspicious. "Can I help you?" asked Alf. "Yes, yes, I think so" the visitor said. "I'm Major Andrew Chalk of the Congress Hall, I think you know it. "They both nodded (Mary had joined Alf now). "You'll be the parents of Len Richards I suppose, is he in?" "No, no eh eh Major" Alf was nervous, "no he's not". "Oh" the Major hesitated "perhaps I can have a chat with you?" Alf felt Mary dig his back, she didn't want him in, yet he couldn't say no. "Come in then, this is Len's mother" He shook the Major's hand and, somewhat reluctantly, so did Mary. "Sit down, sit down" Alf looked hesitantly at Mary "mother will get you a cup of tea. "Despite their fears and reservations they soon found themselves talking naturally, easily to this friendly, jolly man. "Perhaps you'll give Len a message from me" he said "and, apologetically" "I must go when I've had my cup of tea, I really needed that!" "Yes?" asked Alf politely. "Tell him I'd love to meet him at the Hall on Friday at 7. 0 o'clock, we have a converts meeting. "He rose, asked tentatively "may I have a word of prayer with you?" They couldn't very well refuse and he prayed. They'd never heard a prayer like that before. Simple, warm, direct it touched their hearts. As the Major left Alf looked at his wife. "You'm crying!" he said. "I aren't crying" she protested, wiping her eyes, "I got a cold!"

"We've had a visitor boy!" Len, who had just come in, looked at his father enquiringly "Visitor? who?" he asked. "A Major Chalk" replied his mother watching him



carefully, "he wasn't a bad sort of chap, he had a message for you". Len looked embarrassed, went a little red. "You'm to go a converts' meeting on Friday at 7. 30 at the Congress Hall, what's that about then? "Len was embarrassed, went even redder. He hesitate for a moment, took a deep breath. "Look, Mother, Father, I did tell you I've been "saved". I did find Christ in my life. They call it "conversion, being "born again"and now I have to grow in the Christian life. This meeting is to help me. ""My gawd"said Mary, half-jokingly"you caused me enough trouble when you were born the first time! Had to send Father to walk all across Plymouth to the Doctor's, nearly wore his shoes out! No, we don't exactly understand what's happening to you but we know 'tis good and you mean well and if you should go, you go. Come on, your tea's ready."

The Converts' Meeting, much as he'd half-feared it, was good. Len had told Bessie he was going, he knew she'd be pleased. There were only a few people there apart from the Major. They started with a prayer, or prayers, for the Major was not the only one to pray. Even a few rough-looking men stuttered out a few words of prayer, for they had started to pray for the first time of their lives. The Major pointed out to them that there were some things they ought to do now that they were converted. They must pray about everything in their lives. They must read the Bible, they must steer clear of "worldly"things like the drink, tobacco, Music Hall. (He daren't tell his parents that last bit, they went to the "Palace"every week! ) Later, the Major said, in closing, he would try to teach them some of the beliefs of the "Army"and encouraged them to come to the meetings every Sunday, especially the early morning "Knee Drill"Bessie was waiting for him as he came out. "How did you get on?"she asked, she had wondered what his reaction would be. "Good, good, "he said"but whatever time is "Knee Drill"?

For Percy things did not go as easily and swiftly as they had for his brother. The pull of the Blackshirts was still there but, all the time, he had to face up to some of its very obvious faults. Could he reconcile the lofty idealism, the wonderful patriotism that the movement stood for with some of the brutalities he had seen with his own eyes. He badly needed someone to whom he could talk about issues like this. His family, trying to be understanding, just could not understand. He regretted this, he wished they could but, and he had to admit this reluctantly, their very basic education, their background meant that

they were totally unable to relate to the the new challenge that had come to him. The same thing applied, he had no doubt, with Len and the "Army". The big difference was that Len had Bessie and her family to understand and support him while he could think of no-one with whom he could freely and comfortably discuss the disturbing and challenging claims of Fascism.

At least that was until he met Tom. A regular visitor to the Public Library, he had met Tom almost by accident. He was going in, Tom was coming out, two books in his arms. They collided, Tom dropped one of the books. Feeling it had probably been his fault, Percy quickly apologised and picked the book up. automatically he glanced at the title, it was "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion". I've heard of that book"he commented to the man. The man took the book, looked closely at Percy. He was tall, bespectacled, studious looking. "You interested in that sort of thing? "He enquired, "Well, yes", Percy was hesitant, one had to be careful these days, Fascist were by no means popular. "You can read it yourself if you want. "The man was cautious too. "It won't take me long to read and I can keep it for a fortnight. ""That would be fine", Percy was enthusiastic. "Look, I'm Tom Stevens, I live in the North Road area. Would you like to come and have a cup of tea with me sometime and we can chat about, . . "he smiled, hesitated, "about the state of the country and what perhaps we can do about it". Percy hesitated. "Look", he said, "we don't know one another.... "He stopped and then, right out"are you a Blackshirt? "Tom laughed. "yes, are you? I don't think I've seen you in Lockyer Street. "He laughed, "mind you, he added"I still have lots of doubts lots of questions. I suppose I'm not a Blackshirt strictly speaking, I haven't got a black shirt"they both laughed"but I'm seriously thinking of getting one!"

That visit to Tom's house was the first of many. Here was an intelligent, thinking, patriotic man with whom he could discuss. They would talk for hours, sometimes agreeing wholeheartedly, sometimes disagreeing almost violently but Tom was on the same wavelength as he was. After a few weeks ("think he's got a girl? "his mother asked Alf time and again) Alf would puff contentedly at his pipe and say"damn well hope so!") they decided to study books on Fascism together. Tom was ahead of Percy in his knowledge of and understanding of Fascism. He was well read in history, he'd studied history at Cambridge, had hoped to teach it but ill-health had put a stop to that. . Working now in an

office in the Dockyard he still read widely.

One day, as soon as Percy entered his house Tom rushed up him brandishing a book. "Have you read this Percy?" he asked "this man Warwick Deeping really shows you one of the reasons why Fascism has made such an appeal to certain people." He handed the book to Percy who looked at the title "Sorrell and son". "What's it about then?" he asked. "I'm not going to tell you" grinned Tom. "You read it for yourself and, the next time you come, you can tell me what you think about it and why I say what I did about this book and Fascism."

Percy couldn't put the book down. Published first, he noticed, in 1925, it told the story of Stephen Sorrell and his son Kit. Initially Percy found himself caught up in the story itself, Sorrell's selfless and unceasing struggle to do his best for Kit, prepare him for life. An ex-officer, whose wife had left him, he'd won the M. C. in the war but had been forced to settle for the humdrum, demeaning job as a porter in a hotel. Bullied, ill-paid, he still managed to make it possible for Kit to have private tuition and, eventually go to university and become a surgeon. The book was warm, human, compelling and Percy, at the first reading, had forgotten what Tom had told him about the link with Fascism. Then he saw what Tom meant. "It's about the ex-officer class from the war who can't get suitable employment" he told Tom at their next meeting. "Right", Tom confirmed this view. "And there are thousands of them, unhappy, impoverished, in totally unsuitable jobs and this," he paused dramatically, sarcastically, waving the book which Percy was returning. "is this a land fit for heroes?" "And many of them are now becoming Fascists?" asked Percy. "Yes you see Mosley understands them and gives them hope" said Tom.

Stephen Sorrell, the main character in "Sorrell and Son" haunted Percy. He'd found the book moving, challenging and more and more the reality of the humiliating experience of men like Stephen Sorrell came as a rebuke and challenge to him. He could see "Stephen Sorrell" in some of the men he met, some of them in the Blackshirt movement. Capable men, disciplined men, smartly turned out yet men who seemed to be living in an alien country that clearly did not value them for what they were or, particularly, what they had been. They did not complain openly about what was happening to them normally. Except

for a few rather aggressive hotheads who missed no opportunities of grumbling they generally maintained a dignified silence though one could sense the deep feeling of disillusionment that was always with them.

“I’ve got something else for you to read” said Tom, as Percy handed “Sorrell and Son” back to him. “It’s dynamite! All about a Jewish and Masonic plot to take control of the world!” Percy smiled to himself, Tom, he was discovering, seemed to relish in somewhat out of the way ideas. “Really?” He replied “what’s it called?” Tom beckoned him closer, looked carefully around him. “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” he whispered conspiratorially. “I’ll let you have it the next time we meet.” Percy thanked him dutifully but privately hoped they wouldn’t be meeting for a while. He was beginning to tire of this intense, almost fanatical man. Tom was certainly well-read, he had a good mind and a great amount of enthusiasm but he could be rather off-putting. Despite this he couldn’t break his link with Tom too abruptly and he had to admit that the “Protocol of the Elders of Zion” quite fascinated him. “Right”, he said, “the next time we meet.”

“What time?” Len was aghast. Bessie had suggested that, now he was converted, and had met the Major, he ought to attend some more “Army” meetings. “I always go to Knee Drill” she said, “you could if you wanted to.” Then she told him the time of the meeting. “Seven o’clock!” Len shook his head. His family would definitely think he was mazed if he got up at that time on a Sunday morning. “Don’t worry”. Bessie quickly noticed his reaction. “There’s always the Holiness Meeting at eleven o’clock” she ventured. Ben still hesitate, eleven o’clock was a lot better than seven o’clock but the very name “Holiness Meeting” frightened him to death. Although he knew that, deep down, his life had changed, although he genuinely wanted to know more about the Christian faith he now felt committed to, he still held back to some extent. A very keen “Recruiting Sergeant” at the Congress Hall had suggested to him that he now ought to wear an “S” on his coat. “It’s a witness”! the man had said (he had an “S” badge in his hand! ) “it tells everybody you’re saved!” Len had politely refused! “Right, I’ll come with you next Sunday” he agreed “but, before then, my mother and father would like you to come to tea on Friday.” Bessie (who had been half expecting such an invitation and secretly dreaded it) agreed immediately. He

had bought his own Bible now, he prayed (with no-one else around of course! 0and tried very hard to adjust, in his daily living, to the new factor that had come into his life. He was different, he knew it, he couldn't understand it but he knew it. Even his parents had noticed a change. "Something 'ave happened"he heard his mother say to his father the other day. Obviously they didn't know he could hear them. "'E's different, can't argue about that, can't say exactly what it is but e's different". The whole thing was so unexpected. religion had played no part at all in his life before. It was the Congress Hall, meeting Bessie, going to those strange, disturbing services, coming home and praying by his bedside. It was real but now he needed it work it out.

He had been dreading Friday, Bessie coming to tea! How would she get on with his parents? He'd given them strict instructions to put the beer bottles out of the way and to mind their language! He hadn't dared to ask his Father not to smoke his pipe, that would be asking for trouble. His mother was very quiet as the time approached. He knew she was worried, half afraid that her boy was getting into something that she neither liked or understood. He'd had girl friends before but this one was different. She had to make a good impression though for his sake and she busied around, dusting, sweeping quite unnecessarily and grumbling to herself all the time. This, Len thought. was the next stage. After that he knew the parents would have to meet! David Cole, Bessie's father was known locally as a "clever man". In addition to his skill as a surgical shoemaker he was in great demand to help less literate friends write letters!" "Ess I hear he's some clever man"his mother had observed, almost reluctantly, one day. Her expression, tone of voice spoke volumes, "we'll have to wait and see!"

"Here it is!"Tom, with a mixture, partly triumphant, partly conspiratorial, handed a large envelope to Percy. "What? "Percy, was almost suspicious. He was, quite frankly, getting a little fed up with Tom who was tending now to monopolize him. "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion!" said Tom in a whisper, looking carefully around as he spoke. "Read it as soon as you can. It'll tell you all about the Jewish conspiracy"he explained, "but I want it back!"

Back at home Percy took the documents out of the envelope. One glance revealed that this

was something extraordinary, sensational but rather far fetched.

It seemed it originated in Russia somewhere about 1906 and had become widely circulated in the West in subsequent years and now had virtually world wide circulation. It was in essence a sort of anti-Semitic tract which alleged a Jewish and Masonic plot to achieve world domination. What were described as the "Protocols", of which there were 24, were supposed to be instructions to a new Elder outlining how the group would control the world. The instructions were frightening, extreme almost nightmarish. World wars were to be started to bring in world government, economic depressions were to be engineered to destroy world currency, the destruction of Christianity, Islam and other religions and cultures would leave a vacuum for the ultimate victorious emergence of Jewish supremacy.

Percy threw the document down, rubbish! Did Tom and many others take this kind of drivel seriously? He was becoming increasingly aware of the anti-Semitic nature of Fascism. "Yids, Yids, we've got to get rid of the Yids" had become an almost obligatory chant in some of the Blackshirt meetings he had attended and he was become more and more uncomfortable with this aspect of the movement. He hastened back to Tom's house. "Great, isn't it?" Tom greeted him enthusiastically. "To be honest, Tom, I don't really think much of it" Percy said quietly. Tom was taken aback. "Oh, well, come in anyway. There's something I want to show you." After what he'd said about the "Protocols" Percy felt he couldn't really refuse. "Look, look at this" Tom held up a black shirt. "I've officially joined!" He was proud, enthusiastic. "Here" he said, handing the shirt to Percy. "You try it on!" Still feeling half guilty Percy felt he could hardly refuse. It fitted him perfectly. Tom was delighted, "there" he said, shaking Percy's hand "now you're a Blackshirt!" "And that" Percy thought to himself, "is perhaps the nearest I'll ever get to it!" Much as he found the movement attractive, thrilling, there remained within him a caution, a hesitation, almost a suspicion that this could never really be for him, and yet he found it fascinating, challenging and strangely appealing. Before he left Tom's house he had promised, somewhat reluctantly, to go with him to the forthcoming rally at Olympia. "That'll convince you to put the black shirt one!" Tom had said "you see!"

The front door went, Len rushed out, almost protectively, somewhat anxiously. Bessie was

there, flowers in her hand. "Come in my 'ansum", Mary's Cornish voice rang out and then she appeared. She was going to take over! She did! Bessie was ushered ceremoniously into the "front room" that was so rarely used except for special occasions. This was a special occasion, Mary was going to make sure of that! Sitting decorously (and obviously uncomfortably\_were Lily and Dorothy who stood up as Bessie entered. Mary introduced them, very formally, and then said "Father's coming in a minute and perhaps Percy might call in. "The girls sat quietly, awkwardly for a moment or two then Bessie started to giggle, a nervous, almost uncontrollable giggle that set the two sisters off. "Good job Mother isn't here", said Lily with a laugh "she'd tell us off. ""Yes", said Bessie, "I hear she's quite a character!" They all laughed then started chatting. The two sisters were surprised to discover that Bessie had a real sense of humour. "I've left off what Len calls my "pinch nose" glasses" she said, chuckling, "I only wear them because I think they look nice, but he doesn't. "

Father came in. Awkwardly, almost gruffly he put his hand out for Bessie to shake. "Glad to see 'ee" he said "you'm welcome. ""Tea's ready", shouted Mary "come in please. "Lily looked at Dorothy and grinned "she's polite today" she said. The table was set as the girls had never seen it set before. Even Len, who had kept in the background was surprised. The best white tablecloth, flowers, newly polished cutlery. They sat down nervously. "I expect" said Mary to Bessie, "that you say Grace at meals, so I'll say one now!" The family were astonished. "Grace had no part in their meals. Mary put on a pious face, a pious voice. "God bless this food which now we take and make us good for Jesus' sake" she intoned. "Right, now tuck in my 'ansome and have a good tea. "

The family were charmed by Bessie. Far from being the sanctimonious girl they expected she had a strong and cheeky sense of humour. She could pull Alf's leg to his obvious delight. The meal was a great success. "Sorry we got no Cornish cream" said Mary apologetically "this Devon stuff id'n much good!" It was then that Percy came in. "Sorry I'm late, Mother", he said. "Been with that Tom" she observed sniffily, she didn't like Tom. "Yes", Lily had a twinkle in her eye. "I saw him yesterday, he said he had a black shirt for you. So you'd a Blackshirt now!" Percy coloured, "no. I'm not and I don't know if I ever will be!" "Ope not!" said Mary sharply. "I'll have to see. "Percy was embarrassed "Anyway

I'm going up to London next week, to Olympia in fact. I want to see for myself what a real, great Blackshirt rally is like. "

Still feeling awkward Percy engaged Bessie in conversation. They got on very well and any inhibitions on either side were soon gone. Bessie had heard about Percy and the Blackshirts before she ever met him of course and she was fascinated to meet him. Very different from Len, he was very courteous and obviously very sensitive. In his turn he quizzed her about the Salvation Army. "I don't know very much about it"he said"but, since my brother has become involved I'm really interested to hear about it. "Quietly, clearly she told him something about its beginnings in the slums of London, of the great General Booth and his remarkable family and, finally. of the "Corps", as Salvationists called their church in the Congress Hall in Martin Street.

The meal proved a great success. Tinned salmon was the main dish, bread and butter ("bread and butter, Len, not "bremburrer""his mother would correct his Plymouth pronunciation. ) Then, inevitably, the "fancies", those sweet cakes beloved of every Plymouthian! They all shook Bessie's hand. "Come again soon, my 'ansum"beamed Mary and remember me to your Mother and Father. "

Len walked with her as they left the house. "That wasn't too bad, was it? "he asked her. "No, it was lovely, I do like your Mother and Father, the girls are nice and Percy is fascinating. ""Now, now. don't 'ee go running after him";laughed Len, "you'm mine!"He left her at her house and hurried home. What did the Richards think of her? "She's a proper little maid"his mother declared, smiling all over her face. He turned towards his father. "Yes, ...she'll do"he agreed.

The Richards family still sat round the table, "Now, boy". Len could tell he was in for "mother's lecture", nothing new. "Now, she's a very, very nice girl from a decent home"she commenced. She looked squarely at him. "Now, you treat her properly. Don't you go....."The look on her face was sufficient. He knew what she meant! The girls were laughing. ""He won't mother, he's a Christian now, he's in the Sally Army!"Then, this was planned, the girls started singing, "The Salvation Army, free from sin, tried to go to Heaven



in a corned-beef tin". They all laughed, even Len. "Now, that's enough of that, leave the boy alone. "She turned towards Alf, "you can light up your pipe now!"

It was June 7th 1934 and Percy, with his friend Tom, were approaching the famous Olympia for what Tom had promised would be an unforgettable experience for Percy. Even to get in was an unforgettable experience for they had to push their way, via a guard of police, through a crowd of thousands who were demonstrating outside the building. "Bloody Commies!" commented Tom. Percy was amazed not only at the number of people in the hostile crowd but in the fearsome way they were shouting, shrieking insults. The crowd reminded him of a animal baying for blood. Tom took him by the arm, "come this way"he said, reassuringly, some of our people are there. "His "people", of course, meant Blackshirts. Tom himself was in the Blackshirt uniform. "I've got your shirt here with me"he had whispered to Tom as they entered, "because, after this, you'll want to join us!"

It had taken them longer than they had expected to get to Olympia and the crowd had also slowed them down. So it was that they were almost late for the opening of the ceremony. They had hardly sat down when a group of young people near them started a chant. "Hitler and Mussolini, what are they for? Thuggery, buggery, hunger and war!"

As the minutes ticked by the excitement grew and then, a fanfare, lights, the fascist anthem was played and, in came Mosley! Once again Percy was captivated by this man. Athletic, good-looking he carried with him an aura of authority, a commanding presence, the very epitome of the kind of leader the country needed.

Shouts, counter shouts rang around the building, the menacing shrieks of the Communists, the deafening roars of the two thousand Blackshirts. Percy was thrilled. The occasion, the noise, the banners and, of course, the man! The romantic side of his nature rose in near exultation at the glory of the occasion.

There were, he was aware, sporadic outbreaks of violence but none near to him and he listened, spellbound, to the stirring oratory of this remarkable man. The very emotion of the

occasion drove away his doubts about becoming a Blackshirt. This was what the country needed, discipline and the challenging leadership of a Mosley. He nudged Tom. "I'm sure now", he whispered, "I'm going to join!"

Back home the next day with a great deal of trepidation he told his parents of his decision. "I believe it is what I have to do"he explained"but I won't wear the uniform at home. "His parents, perplexed, almost horrified as they obviously were, said little.

Len was not surprised when Percy told him. The brothers, different in so many ways, had a real affection for one another and always respected one another's views. "Well"he said, on hearing the news, "if I really become a Salvationist I tell you I'll wear my red jersey at home!"

Len's road to becoming a Salvationist was fairly long and fairly winding. That he was now a Christian he could not doubt. In all sorts of ways, obvious or subtle, he was different. He was no saint and knew he never would be. He could flare up (like his mother) , be moody (like his father) and he was aware of persistently selfish motives in his life, but he had changed. He could now pray, not in public as many Salvationists did, but when he was on his own and praying meant a lot to him. He tried to read the Bible, found it terribly difficult but used some Bible reading notes that Bessie had given him and, to his surprise it began to make some sense. More and more he was enjoying the meetings at the Congress Hall. That place had a real, dynamic atmosphere. The noise, the bustle, the excitement when the band came in from their open-air meeting at the Octagon, the lively singing, the down-to-earth preaching all began to mean so much more to him. The Sunday morning meeting was his favourite. It was quieter, more "worshipful" in a sense. To join in the prayer choruses which were so simple and meaningful and to hear some of the real saints praying moved him to very core of his being. His developing relationship with Bessie and her parents played a significant part. They were real Christians, not sanctimonious but devout in a very real and practical way. He knew, deep down, that he would eventually become a Salvationist. Percy, having decided to throw his lot in with the Blackshirts, felt a sense of relief to a point but not perhaps as strongly as he had hoped. He had become increasingly aware of the violent

aspects of the Fascist movement, aspects he deplored and tried, unsuccessfully, to ignore. But it was there. His family, his friends constantly reminded him about it but, unhappy with it as he was, he somehow felt that it was a regrettable part of the package that was the Blackshirt movement of which he generally approved. He even had qualms about Mosely himself. That he was a born leader he had no doubt but rumours of his sexual activities concerned him and there was something about him (those eyes! ) that almost seemed sinister. "The great thing about Mosely"he would often declare as he discussed the issue with Len and others"his determination that there should be no repetition of the Great War. He can see things going in that direction and his priority is to prevent, if at all possible and by almost any means, the sacrifice of another generation of young men. "That, for him, was the determining factor and he had decided to involve himself in the movement with this chief aim in mind. He had gone through the preliminaries the previous week. There had been an interview conducted by the head of the local branch. Somewhat surprisingly he was urbane, courteous and seemed highly civilised. He'd had to sign a document expressing his intention to join the movement and to try to further its interests, he'd shake hands and that was it. "You are now an official member of the British Union of Fascists, Mr Richards. "He'd been measured for the obligatory black shirt. "I dare say you will have suitable trousers already, Mr Richards. Your shirt will be ready on Wednesday. "

The Blackshirt Headquarters had been fairly empty when he had officially joined. Now, as he came back to pick up his shirt, it was bustling with activity. He was directed to the appropriate desk, received the shirt. "Now go and put it on!"he was directed. He went into a side room, put it on, looked at himself in the mirror. His feelings were mixed but now he was committed and now he had to prove it. He walked quickly back to Tom Stevens' house. Fortunately no one seemed to notice the shirt he was wearing. Once inside he looked in the mirror with a mixture of pride and a strange sense of misgiving. "Well done", Tom grasped his hand and congratulated him although Percy thought he could detect a questioning look in his friend's eye. What bothered him as he changed back into his usual shirt and what had bothered him all the way to Tom's house were the last few words of the tough looking Blackshirt who had accompanied him to the door of the Headquarters. "Now you're with us, we expect you to be with us at the meeting at the Octagon on Sunday, soon after seven.

We've got to wait till that bleddy Salvation Army lot have left. "The man stopped, grinned, leant nearer to Percy and, in a loud whisper, added"one day we're going to go there early and frighten the buggers to death!"Percy knew that Len's Bessie sometimes attended the "Army" open air meetings at the Octagon on a Sunday. He went cold. It was a matter of months after Percy became a Blackshirt that Len became a Salvationist. Time after time he agonized over the issue. Was he interested in the Salvation Army simply or mainly because of Bessie? Their relationship became closer, dearer as the days went by. She really was a fine girl, would have been a fine girl, he felt, even had she not been a Salvationist, but that factor somehow added an indescribable quality to her. Her faith was real, deep, practical, simple and it influenced everything she did, said or thought. He was realizing more and more just how influential the whole "Army "background could be. There was something deep in its very being that was unique, powerful, inspiring, demanding. Her parents, he knew, had been Salvationists for years and she had told him of some of the persecution her father had undergone in his younger days when, to attend an "Army" open-air, was almost to take your life in your hands. Bessie was often at the open-air on a Sunday in the Octagon, she felt it was her duty to "witness" in this way, to stand up openly for her faith.

No! The "Army "and all it stood for, now appealed to him more and more and it was not simply because of Bessie. There was a rugged reality about its Christianity, a genuine abandonment to the will of God (he later heard this described as its "Franciscan quality") that worked out in a robust, healthy, practical Christianity of a type he had never known before. When Percy threw his lot in with the Blackshirts his parents had been deeply upset and, although he knew they regarded the "Army" differently, for him to become a uniformed Salvationist would still be hard for them to take. Yet he had to. he knew that, and he told them. They had expected it, of course. "You do what you believe is right, boy"his father had said"she's a nice little maid!" (Len smiled to himself;f, they too thought that he was taking this step because of Bessie! ) "She is, sure 'nuff"said his mother, administering a most untypical kiss on his cheek! The whole family attended the Congress Hall that night to see Len enrolled as a Salvationist. He confirmed that he had read, understood and agreed with the "Articles of War", the "Army's) expression of belief. He confirmed his discipleship of Christ and his intention to become a Salvationist. Then, as he stood beneath

the “Army” flag (Yellow, Red and Blue) , the Major solemnly enrolled him as a Soldier in the Salvation Army. Len looked across to where his family sat with the Coles. He smiled, he was happy. There were his parents, his sisters (Lilly crying her eyes out) and even Percy. With them were the Cole family, Bessie of course, her parents and Bill her brother. That was it. He was now a Salvationist, soon he’d ask Bessie to marry him.

Percy, despite his reservations about the Salvation Army, had been profoundly moved that night at the Congress Hall. He admired the movement, admired his brother. If only, he often thought, they would do something about the political situation. Their religion was real enough, that was obvious, they did great work among the needy, that he could not deny. To him, though, there was one great lack. They needed to be more political. Great issues were in the air. The General Strike had, for a while, paralysed the country, a symptom, surely of the malaise in the body politic of the land. There were worrying signs of deep trouble in Spain, some even thought that they would lead to civil war. For the Blackshirts, rumours of the movement’s financial indebtedness to Mussolini was prove a hindrance and, behind it all, the advent of Hitler in Germany cast a threatening shadow on the future. But now, for him, his first open air meeting in the Octagon!

His feelings were mixed as he put the black shirt on. Now he’d have to come out into the open. If he was a Blackshirt he’d have to wear a black shirt for all to see. Sunday evening, the open air meeting in the Octagon. As he made his way there with Tom there was a sense of exhilaration, this would be a challenge. There was also a sense of concern, he hoped the Salvationists would have left by the time he arrived. The threat of “frightening the buggers to death” had worried him. The trouble was, he could tell that the man who had made the threat really meant it!

No, the Octagon was clear. The Salvationists, including Bessie and parents and, probably, his brother Len, had made their way into the Congress Hall. He heaved a sigh of relief. What he did notice, though, were the number of tough looking men who were idling around the site of the meeting. They tried to be unobtrusive but he knew quite well who they were. They were Communists! One, a well known barber in the area. he recognized because he

had sometimes had his haircut by him. He was, he believed, a convinced Communist. He hoped he was a peaceful Communist! Although he had seen Communist opposition in meetings he had attended locally and in London, he had seen them as an observer, now they were enemies. He was totally convinced of the Communist menace. The movement seemed to be making progress in various places and he had an instinctive distrust of it. Britain must not go Communist, he was sure of that, and he had become a Blackshirt partly to try and prevent that.

A makeshift platform was speedily erected, a strong group of Blackshirts appear, marching from Lockyer Street and headed by the visiting speaker, an able, aggressive man whose reputation had come before him. The Blackshirts gathered around him, a cordon of protecting supporters who cast, from time to time, anxious glances at the Communists who were now appearing in greater numbers and closing in ominously. The visiting speaker stood up. "My friends", he began. "You're no bloody friend of ours!" shouted the barber. The man ignored the interruption. "Our beloved country is in danger" he continued. "Yes, because of buggers like you!". The barber was on form!

Up to this point Percy and Tom had held back, were standing cautiously on the fringe of the Blackshirt contingent. "Come in, come in further", the local leader was beckoning them. Cautiously they made their way nearer to the centre of things. "Our beloved country is in danger...." repeated the speaker. It was obvious he was well accustomed to this sort of heckling. "In danger because of the menace of Communism, a poisonous creed that is threatening to sap the very manhood of our fine young men, young men who, in the past, may well have been Boy Scouts and who recognize, in our growing movement, some of the same outlooks and aspirations." He stopped suddenly, ducked just in time as a brick hurtled past his head. that was the signal for the Communist attack. Howling, their features suffused with hatred, they surged forward, some carrying sticks, some throwing more stones. Immediately, expertly, the well drilled Blackshirts formed a defensive square and, each one picking out one Communist, went into the fight. Percy had not really reckoned on this although, of course, he had heard of such happenings. He was forced forward, found himself face to face with a young Communist whose face was set, hatred in his eyes and was

armed with a sort of cudgel. He didn't reach Percy, a black shirted figure, Percy recognized him as a former boxer, punched the young man straight on the jaw and floored him. Whistles sounded, the police, who had been waiting nearby, closed in, separated the two parties and, after a struggle, restored order. The visiting speaker insisted in the last word. "You see, my friends, Communism would not allow free speech. Join us in our crusade against them and fight for Britain!" Percy was not sorry to leave. He had not been hurt but the sight of the venomous anger of both parties was to haunt him day and night. Both parties!

David and Jane Cole knew what was coming. Len's visits to their house were becoming more and more frequent and Bessie was talking more and more about him. He had recently worn his Salvation Army uniform for the first time, had agreed to try to learn to play an instrument so that he could play in the Congress Hall band and he was obviously feeling genuinely happy to be a Salvationist. "You'll have to ask Father" Bessie had said when he proposed to her. She paused, blushed, "I think he'll agree".

He couldn't wait to sit down to tea. He had to ask now. "Mr Cole" he ventured (the ladies had deliberately left them on their own on the pretext they were preparing the tea) "there's something I want to ask you". David Cole smiled, "Yes, boy?" he said. "Could I, may I?" "Len was nervous. "The fact is I want to marry Bessie please if it's all right with you. "David laid his hand on the young man's shoulder, Len was shaking. "Yes, yes, of course", David beamed, "God Bless 'ee, boy!" The ladies must have been listening outside for Bessie entered quickly followed by her mother. "Well?" she looked at her Father, "well what?" he teased her. "The answer's yes" said Len, standing up and embracing her. "You must be engaged first for a while, of course" David said and Jane too embraced her daughter and kissed the embarrassed Len. "Of course" he said, winking at Bessie, "that's if I can afford a ring!"

"Yes, and you'm to be my best man. "Len had rushed home, broken the news to his family and so greeted Percy who readily accepted. "Don't worry, he said, laughing, I won't wear my black shirt!" "But I'll be wearing my uniform, you can be sure of that" said Len. All the

family were happy. They had expected this and thoroughly approved of the match. Beneath his happiness though, Percy had a strange, unhappy feeling that he and his brother were moving further and further apart. Two brothers, each with deep convictions. which one, he wondered, was right?

Despite Percy's fears it seemed, for a while at least, that, far from moving apart, they seemed to draw closer. From time to time they would discuss their feelings, their convictions. They both knew that, with the best will in the world, their parents would never really understand why their boys were so deeply involved in, and committed to, such different and apparently, irreconcilable movements.

"Well, we'm both going to do what we think is right but, perhaps in different ways"observed Len one day. "Yes, and we'm doing it sincerely and with conviction"added his brother. "I know I'm not religious like you"he grinned slyly and added"I haven't met a Blackshirt Bessie yet! , but our intentions are good. The country is in a mess and it seems to be sliding downwards. We believe in discipline, order, patriotism, a concerted, united effort to avoid the sort of conditions that led to the last war. There must never again be another one like it!"Len nodded. "I agree with you there"he said, "of course our movement is also disciplined as you know and we try to live our lives according to our beliefs Percy reached out, grasped his brother's arm and said "I do know, and the Army is right for you as Fascism is for me. "

Len had never taxed his brother with some of the criticism of the Blackshirt movement that he heard from time to time. Its obvious approval of the Nazi movement, its sympathy with the Republican movement in Spain and its reputed financial dependence on Mussolini. Equally his quieter, less demonstrative brother had never teased Len about the rumours of the Booth's wealth and, what concerned many respectable Christian people, the seeming rowdiness and near hysteria of some of the meetings. But both brothers respected the other's views because the brothers respected one another.

Hitler, Franco, Mussolini. Their names and their reputations haunted Percy. That he shared



some of their political beliefs there was no doubt, that he feared the Communist threat went without saying. If only these convictions could be shared without the worrying and undeniable reality of the violence.

The boys, having declared their allegiance to the movements they had joined, Len and Bessie now being engaged, it seemed that things were going along more or less uneventfully. The ever present threat from Nazi Germany seemed, for a while, to be averted and, though the Spanish Civil War (a rehearsal, some were saying, for the approaching war) was causing deep concern in some quarters. It was only people like Churchill who seemed to sense the coming disaster.

It came, September 3rd, 1939 but it was a day of two disasters for the Richards family. Alf had always been "chesty" (Mary's word for it). From time to time he had been forced to take things easily ("and stop smoking that dirty old pipe!".... . Mary again. ) But his death from pneumonia on that very day came, for his family, an even greater shock than the declaration of war. Mary, tough woman that he was, surprised the family by the depth of her grief, grief mixed with bitterness. They had never been openly affectionate (she would say, from time to time "I'll never end my days with him! ) but their love was deep and real,

It was when Major Chalk, the Army officer from Congress Hall, came to visit them that the bitterness went. Genuinely sympathetic, down to earth yet quietly offering sensible comfort, he got through to her and when, with her approval, he prayed with the family, the tears came and the bitterness went. So it was that Mary, later that month, felt happy to go to the wedding of Len and Bessie at the Congress Hall. "Our Major", as Mary now called him, conducted a moving, memorable service. "You won't never see me in a bonnet though!" Mary declared, "but I might go to the Army sometimes. "

Being boilermakers and working in the Yard, the brothers were not available for the forces, a fact which caused mixed feelings in both of them. Their friends and workmates, of course, knew why they were still civilians, but occasionally other people, unaware of their situation, made remarks that cause them great distress. So many Plymouth women had men away in the Forces, so many already widowed, that the brothers, sensitive both, were often

deeply hurt.

Working in the Dockyard, though, had its compensations. The men were quickly aware of interesting or exciting movements in the naval world. There was the occasion in 1940 when the “Ajax”, one of the legendary heroes of the Battle of the River Plate, returned to her home port. The news of her arrival spread like wildfire and, as she was towed up the Hamoaze, cheering crowds thronged the Hoe and other areas from which she could be viewed.

She finally reached the Dockyard, a Dockyard that, for a while, was singularly unproductive! Out thronged the “Dockyardies” from their place of work, now temporarily deserted. The bosses didn't try to stop them, it wouldn't have worked! This was Plymouth, the “Ajax” had thrilled their souls and they were there to greet her. Both brothers were there, each knew for certain that the other would be in the crowd. And, almost inevitably, they found one another. They waved, they cheered till they were hoarse. It was the same with the return of the “Exeter”, crewed largely by Westcountry men and built in Devonport. This time Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, steamed out in an Admiralty barge to greet her. Cheers again, the Royal Marine band at Devil's Point played her in, the final docking in the yard and, once again, the “Dockyardies” out in force, Len and Percy again among them, cheering as they had done for the valiant “Ajax”. Then, in June of the same year, Dunkirk and the Sunday they were never to forget.

Nothing could have prepared them for the Sunday in 1940. The phoney war had dragged on, many Plymouthians (men and women) in the forces were now away from home but life had not yet become that abnormal. “Perhaps I'll come with you tonight”, Mary always tried to appear matter of fact when suggesting she join Len and Bessie in the Congress Hall (“never see me in a bonnet!”), but they knew that, although she would never admit it, she had found something worthwhile and helpful in the Army. Very different from Bessie's parents as she was, she had become genuinely fond of them and they had increasingly appreciated the real worth of this feisty woman. The meeting was well in progress, the band playing its usual selection of the typically Salvationist music that the movement was now

producing. There was a stir at the entrance, people hurrying in and out, whispers developing into shouts. "Soldiers, our soldiers, French soldiers down at Millbay!

Historically minded Plymouthians might well, that night, have gone back over the years to the unforgettable day when, with Drake arriving back into Plymouth, the congregation of St Andrews Church had emptied. They went down to the harbour to greet him! This, though, was no triumphal occasion. The Richards, the Coles joined with members of the congregation moving out of the hall. "Down at Millbay station, they'm down there!" Following the crowd, they made their way hastily to the station. As they approached it they saw, to their amazement, a few buses carrying what were clearly French officers, sitting stiffly, silent and immobile, heading towards the city centre. Millbay station was packed. Soldiers, British soldiers these, from Dunkirk, as the people were later to find out. Already local Salvationists were there, had been there a long time, handing out mugs of tea, sandwiches, trying to bring comfort and hope to these despairing men. Len noticed, with amusement, one particular incident. A young Plymouth boy, aged no more than eight or nine, had approached a group of soldiers. They had briefly chatted to him before they had to move off. One of them handed him an army blanket and the boy, thrilled to bits, had carried it off with a wide grin on his face!

That night they realized, perhaps for the first time, that the war was no longer phoney, it was real and it was going to affect them. The events of that evening had, fortunately, not affected Bessie, now halfway through her pregnancy, a pregnancy which, in months to come, was to bring Len and her a much loved daughter, Carrie.

As the war progressed so life became much harder for Percy. Never afraid to stand up for what he so deeply believed in, he increasingly became the butt of certain men (and women!) . in . More worrying for Percy, though, was the increasingly intense inner conflict. He hid it from the family and Tom but he could not hide it from himself. He was still convinced of the validity of much of what the Blackshirt movement stood for. He still believed that it could offer Britain the high aims, the determined motivation, the steely wholesome discipline that the country so badly needed. Yet, as time went by, he could no longer close

his eyes to the brutality which seemed to be an intrinsic part of the movement to which he was so deeply committed. He could no longer fail to see the dread similarities between Fascism and the undeniably evil of the Nazism of Hitler's Germany. Sensitive, gentle soul that he was, he was suffering and could see no honourable way out. Like Len he had, more than once, tried to join up to prove his patriotism but, every time he was turned down because of his trade. The country, he was told, needs you in the Dockyard.

He too had gone to the Congress Hall to see Carrie "dedicated" under the Army Flag. It was moving. The simple sincerity, the warmth, the love for this little baby moved him. He often wished he could find a "Bessie" for himself. Reasonably presentable, he had often been approached by women of the movement. Not unappreciative of their charms, to which he knew he was susceptible, he knew none of them were for him.

The problem was, although he hesitated to admit it, even to himself, that the kind of girl he was meeting, either socially or in the Blackshirt movement, were not his equal intellectually. His family, also, were good, loving, hardworking but totally unable to communicate with him at his level. They didn't read, except that Len made valiant attempts to read the Army literature, their vocabulary was necessarily limited. Their conversation very basic. He honestly didn't look down on them, he loved them all very dearly but it was to Tom he had to turn for the kind of discussion, debate to which he could really relate. Girls, apparently, weren't for him.... until he met Winifred. He met her in the library, they had both reached onto a shelf for the same book. It was the biography of a well known politician. They both laughed, chatted, discovered they had a lot in common. The relationship grew, much to his mother's delight, until her father found he was a Blackshirt. "We mustn't meet any more" she sobbed that evening. But they did meet, in secret, they met unknown to her parents but with the defiant support of his mother, although they knew that the odds were against them marrying, unless he left the Blackshirts.

The war progressed, air raids had now become frequent, destructive and frightening. Buildings not far from the family home had been destroyed, good friends had been killed but the spirit of the people of Plymouth had, generally speaking, been strong, determined.

Len became more and more involved in the Congress Hall Corps. The loss of men who were now in the forces was often more than made up for by the arrival of Salvationist servicemen now stationed in or around the city who appreciated the meetings and Christian fellowship of the Congress Hall. Even more did they appreciate the hospitality of “Army families who invited them into their homes. Lilly certainly appreciated the Welsh sailor, Glyn, an “Army “bandsman, whom she met at the home of Len and Bessie! To everyone’s astonishment she even started going to the “Army“! The family teased her of course but slowly they came to recognize a distinct change in her, the “Army” had won another adherent!

### ***Postscript***

March 20th 1941 was to be very special for Plymouthians. It was supposed to be a secret but the rumours got around that the King and Queen would be visiting the city!

They did, viewing the appalling damage, meeting the people and going to the Dockyard.

That day both Len and Percy saw the King himself as he stood and waved from a balcony in the Yard. Plymouth was gratified, Plymouthians felt they had not been forgotten.

That night it happened. The city had known what bombing could be but that night was the worst they had ever experienced. The raid was devastating, the damage widespread.

Percy and his mother sat together that night. Elderly now and frail, she couldn’t get to the main shelter, the “Morrison”shelter in the room had to do. The raid went on and on.

“Percy”, it was Len calling. ”They’ve hit the Congress Hall, I’m going down to see if I can help. You look after Mother. ””No”she shook her head, ”you go with him boy, I’ll be all right. ”

The Congress Hall was ablaze, rapidly becoming a ruin. ”If only we could get to the Band

Room we might be able to save some of the instruments”said Len. ”Come on”Percy took his brother’s hand and led the way. A huge piece of masonry fell and hit them both.

Mary, looking out of the window now that the raid was past, saw Len approaching. She knew, she could tell. He went up to her, hugged her. ”’Tis Percy isn’t it? ”she asked calmly, ”he’s gone? ”Len, unable to speak, nodded. Mary sat back, eyes closed and said”the dear ‘av ‘em.”